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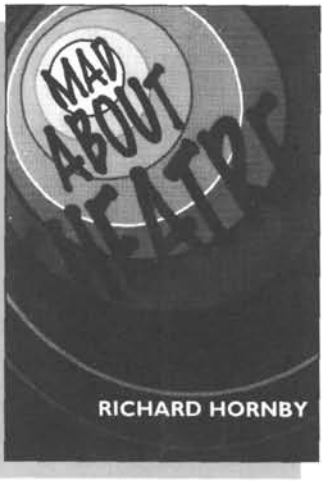

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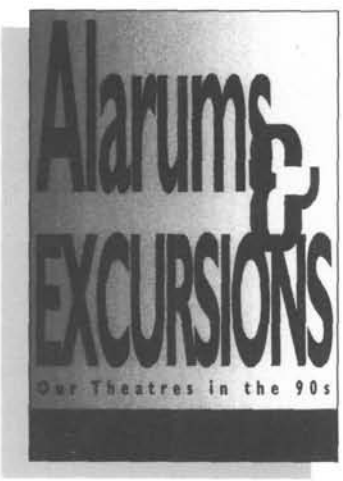

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The Hudson Review

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TO OUR READERS

The holidays are around the corner. For this special season, THE HUDSON REVIEW offers discount gift rates: First subscription: $20; each additional one: $15. No limit on orders. Please remember to include your check.

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CONTRIBUTING EDITORS: Marcia B. Siegel *(Dance)*, Robert S. Clark *(Music)*, Richard Hornby *(Theatre)*, Bert Cardullo *(Film)*, John Loughery *(Art)*

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Comment:

On Amtrak

I'D HAD A POETRY BOOK COME OUT IN SEPTEMBER 1994 and by October I was booked into a series of readings, a little publicity tour, at bookstores and colleges in Washington, Oregon, and British Columbia. Because I had some flexibility about my regular job in downstate Illinois I decided to take the train or, more truly, a succession of trains to my appointed appearances—by the time the travel agent and I had finished up, the Amtrak ticket was five pages long and it was paper-clipped to a receipt for my reservation for a trip on the British Columbia Railway as well. The price of the same journey by airplane would have been about the same but I don't care much for flying and I had some leeway, as I said, in regard to time. And besides, months earlier, I'd had a vision of myself sitting next to a train window for days reading a book.

I'd arranged to go out on a coach on the Empire Builder—that train leaves Chicago every day (or, because of the service cutbacks in 1995, every other day) and arrives finally, 40-something hours later, in Seattle. Or half of it does: Amtrak splits the train in two at Spokane and the half that doesn't go to Seattle goes down to Portland, Oregon. I was going first to Seattle but I'd be returning to Illinois from Portland; I'd get to traverse both forks of the train's route. And, for the trip back, I'd reserved a sleeper, an "Economy Bedroom"—this in anticipation of coming home tired and a bit frazzled, in a state, that is, where I would be appreciative of the privacy.

Most of Amtrak is not about privacy. The train's a quite public space in which people are thrown together, for better or worse, for however many hours. You end up eating and sleeping with strangers or in the presence of strangers. Traditional enmities are put aside for the duration. Put aside? At least they're de-emphasized or, perhaps more to the point, emphasized politely. Among the passengers a haphazard civility exists out of necessity. And some alliances form. "You know that man who's sitting with us?" a little girl said gravely to my daughter when we were travelling back from the West Coast a few years ago. "He's not my dad, he's just some guy my mom met on the train."

The Empire Builder was crowded leaving Chicago but I was lucky and got a window seat, the last one in the Seattle car. Then came the wait as the rest of the passengers straggled on and had to choose whom to sit with among those of us travelling alone. I sat by my window and pretended to be reading a novel as I kept watch over the new people coming into view, praying more than once "not him, please," and "no,

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no not her." Finally I was joined by a young white woman with African braids and numerous sweaters. She'd been driving around the country in her pickup truck having adventures for a year and was on her way to chill out for a while at her great-grandmother's farm in North Dakota. We talked for a little bit and I looked out the window at beautiful Wisconsin—the light was that incredible diffuse light that clear days in autumn have—and she went off to the bar car and I read and dozed and she came back and I went to the bar car and came eventually back and we both dozed. But somewhere late that night, western Minnesota I think, we were both in what I recognize as an odd state of wakefulness that occurs after midnight—and after some little piece of sleep—on public conveyances. It's a timeless state. Anyway that's when she and I finally talked about what we did: she showed me photographs of her paintings, I showed her my new book.

She was a good seat-mate—smart, undemanding, quirky—but when she got off at 6:00 A.M. I luxuriated in having the whole thing, both seats, to myself. I kept it all day across Dakota and Montana and into Idaho but ended up coming into Seattle in the company of a man close to my age on his way to spend the winter with his mother in warm Texas.

Seattle itself was warm and typically rainy but it had been snowing up in Prince George, B.C. when I got there. I had my adventures and proclaimed my visions and rode various ferries and buses and other trains and finished up, finally, at Reed College in Portland and one of my hosts took me to the Amtrak station where my little bedroom was waiting for me on the Empire Builder. As we crossed the Columbia and rolled northeast toward Spokane where the other half of the train would be joined to us, I was thinking of my father and how much he'd enjoyed, as a young man, the few times he'd gone alone on the Hummingbird, the old overnight train between Cincinnati and New Orleans, to visit his parents in Birmingham. I remember riding that train too, as a child, and I've written elsewhere about that and about my father as a young black doctor in the fifties travelling in the Pullman, travelling first class (having bought his way into it) through the bad old South. But I think now that there was something I'd not understood before in the faraway pleasure in his voice, something about the aloneness, when he talked about the Hummingbird, a thing beyond the racial or, at least, beyond the triumph of money over social custom or regulation. During the last ten years or so I've travelled in a fair number of sleepers with my wife and our daughter, but this trip back inland from the Coast was the first time ever that I'd gone in *singular* comfort, the first time ever that the bedroom waited just for me upon my return from the bar or the dining car. On the Empire Builder there that night in dark eastern Washington I felt a burst of affection for my father. I settled in, put my feet up, and let one of the books I'd brought along to read lie in my lap as I looked out the window at the lights in the darkness and indulged myself in easy, pleasurable thought.

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But getting beyond the racial isn't easy; in with the pleasurable thoughts that occupied me on that first night out in my Pullman was my knowledge of eastern Washington's reputation as a stronghold of Aryan Resistance types. Is it really more dangerous than downstate Illinois? I don't know, but I was aware of being borne safely through it, aware of the odd mix of safety and pleasure. One did not diminish the other (or add to it)—it's a mixture I recognized at an early age and that I've become almost used to, the presence of some degree of luxury in the face of implicit danger or, better, the presence of some kind of instability just past the edge of a provisional comfort or graciousness.

Ten or so years ago Joseph Lelyveld wrote an article about his luxurious trip aboard the Blue Train, in unstable South Africa, for the *New York Times*. This was of course in the days slightly before the end of some kinds of apartheid and I recall that Mr. Lelyveld noted that there seemed to be only one topic of conversation on the train or, indeed, in all the Republic. I imagine he was talking about the conversations of white people—I would think that in South Africa conversations about racism and the law have been typical among black people for a good long time, so typical as not to be worthy of note in an article in the *Times* or anywhere else. He went on to say, though, that it was possible to see the striations in South African society by observing the skin color of the various groups of railroad employees—the striations he noted were the predictable ones. But I've always understood South Africa to be such a volatile, emotional issue for Americans—black and white, leftists and right-wingers—because of that country's profound resemblance to our own: in these days slightly before the end of the twentieth century it's possible to observe the hierarchy in American society by observing the jobs different people do for Amtrak. The conductors are white men, generally speaking, and the porters are black men. The fabled and romantic engineer swinging into the locomotive cab or waving up to the child standing with her father on a bridge over the tracks is almost always a white man; but the dining car staff is, overwhelmingly, made up of black men and women. (Those in the kitchen wave also to my daughter and me, they lean out from the galley windows to wave back to us when we, standing outside the Volvo at a grade crossing, watch and wave to them, as the Texas Eagle trundles through our town in Illinois.) On Amtrak the people who regulate things, who carry the responsibility for the train, are white and male; those who *serve*—who make your bed, pour you your drink, bring you your dinner—are black.

On Amtrak dining car meals are included in the price of a first class—that is, sleeping accommodation—ticket, and eating in that car is a communal experience that Amtrak bills as "traditional." The tables all seat four and the steward assigns you to a place when you step into the car. Your dining companions are a game of chance. Yet there's the element of elegance—the white tablecloth, the proximity of the window and its moving scenery, the reasonably high quality of the food—that's interestingly at odds with most notions of chance and the communal. Diners try to make a go of it together, to make conversation with

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strangers, to accept the company that fate has provided. I took a lot of my meals there, even when I was on the coach on the way out and had to pay extra for them. On almost all occasions I found myself the lone person of color at a table of whites—this is not an unusual conjunction or configuration in my life and I have the ease and confidence that comes, that has come to me, with my age. I mean I can talk comfortably to most people who are willing to talk to me at all, I can put them at ease. But on my trip out to the northwest and back, out of that negotiated ease, I think, the topic came up in the talk of my table-mates, again and again: the "rudeness" of the dining-car staff. They'd lean across the linen, lower their voices, and say, "They're rude."

Now I have that cultural commonality with them, the men and women working on the dining car—which means that I'm greeted differently than most of the white patrons and am joked with in ways they are not—but I'm also a good observer of conventions and exchanges and on my trips on the Empire Builder last fall I'd watched the staff or staffs at work and they'd never seemed particularly rude. Unbending about substitutions, not overly sympathetic when someone would whine about there not being French dressing, maybe a little gruff now and again—but not rude. I'd claim as much in my responses to those whispered complaints, occasionally confessing and, at the same time, lecturing that I had once been a taxi driver (when I was in college) and that that experience had made me forgiving ever since in regard to anyone whose work put him or her in contact with the public (and still claiming, paradoxically, that the staff didn't seem rude to me). Conventions and exchanges? This was race talk or, better, this was race talking. The repeating conversation was itself an unstable exchange: my fellow diners approaching me—as someone who, by virtue of being at their table, was like them and yet who was like the crew, too—with a statement and waiting for a response from me, one that might serve as an explanation or palliative. But the real question, the one I heard underneath all and which I did not answer, was "Why don't they *like* serving us?"

My table-mates on this trip out West and back East were, for the greatest part, lower-middle-class white Americans, and it occurs to me that train travel is largely a way for people from the lower classes (including the lower middle class) to move around. Amtrak advertising, however, makes it sound like a transcendent act, a way into luxury, a way (implicitly) out of your birth status. Black people have always taken the train—there were whole Jim Crow cars in the South of recent memory—and we were much in evidence in the coaches on the Empire Builder. Yet we know that there's no way out of how we were born and I think that Amtrak advertising, in spite of its integrated brochures, is largely lost on us. We just take the train like we always have. But I think my white table-mates were rather eager to be waited on and I think also that they wanted someone to be happy to be doing it. Someone who had less status than they did or was at least willing to embrace a lesser status for the moments it took to serve dinner. There's a nostalgia element built into train travel (or at least the train travel described in the Amtrak

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brochures), a harking back to the "traditional," to the days when life was, allegedly, simpler. African-Americans weren't so resentful and dangerous back then. It often seems to me that there's only one topic of conversation in our country.

And within that, status is tricky. I come from a relatively long line of middle-class people, even if my great-grandmother, whom I remember, did clean houses for white folks in Birmingham and even if the stories of my family in bondage (slavery time, which wasn't really *that* far back) are very much a part of our present world view—by this I mean that the long line of my middle-class origins isn't really so long. My cognition of my forerunners having been, in recent memory, the official lowest of the low travels with me and yet I'm heir also to having grown up in the fifties and sixties in the North, of having come to my majority that is, black in a nominally integrated culture. It was the era that came at the end of some kinds of segregation and, though we were able to go places, if cautiously, we—my family, my kith and kin—found ourselves part of no American mainstream: the old striations were still very much in place. It's an era that certainly continues: in most public images of American society—the pictures the culture projects of itself through the big media outlets—black people still occur only as part of the backdrop, or as trouble. I'm an English professor, which accounts for some of the flexibility of my schedule, and I've realized recently that now, in the 1990s, I'm in the *first* generation of black university professors (or the first generation to teach at traditionally white universities)—we're unprecedented, really, and I'm amazed at how many of us I know and how many know me or of me, we're so rare. At the edges of various campuses—my own, places I'm visiting—friendly white people will ask me if I'm a graduate student, though I'm in my 40s. And when I speak publicly at a colloquium or town function they'll compliment me on how "articulate" I am. This is also the language of race, or a shape that that language takes: "articulate" is a word every black academic I've ever spoken to at any length knows—it replaces "You're different," a phrase common 20 years ago in the language of proto-liberal whites, but it means the same thing; it means "You're not like the black people we're scared of." It's an act of naive generosity, I suppose; but I recall that the Boers, until very recently, would exclude visiting black Americans—entertainers, writers, etc.—from apartheid by awarding those visitors something they called "honorary European status." Or perhaps they still award it, unofficially. Anyway, over here, the topic comes up again and again.

Yet I know it's not really the only topic in our republic. On my final night on the train I'd gone down to the bar car around midnight and sat at the far edge of an awful scene—a group of young white men, too drunk to hear the terror in their voices, declaiming loudly about the nastiness of women's bodies. "You guys ever smell a yeast infection?" said one who kept claiming to be an L.P.N. "It's just like when you biopsy someone who's just riddled with cancer." I nursed my bourbon and read at my book but they were too loud and I'd heard it all before

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too many times for it to be even sociologically interesting. I bought another little bottle of Jim Beam, pocketed it, and headed back to my Economy Bedroom through the coaches.

There, in the coaches, the lights were turned way down and people were asleep, sprawled over the seats and snoring in any number of positions. Beached animals, their bodies washed up onto this moving shoreline and myself, temporarily upright, moving through them. Soon I'd be asleep too. My daughter learned to walk as we travelled on trains in England, testing her one-year-old balance against the curves, against the lurches, learning to lean her body into the sway of BritRail. I'm a doctor's son, and that's perhaps why bodies have always only seemed interesting to me: the act of balance, the physical differences between men and women, the capacities for disease and for healing, the projection of the erotic onto them—bodies—and the forms that that can take. Whatever beauty is or is not. In general, though, I suppose that I think we Americans are not a beautiful people: we're overweight, we tend to process our hair into bizarre yet unimaginative frizzes, we wear T-shirts that say utterly inane things. Yet the sight of so many of us asleep—women and men of various ages and sizes, a handful of impossibly gawky teenagers, some babies—and together was itself, as a composition, lovely. Sleep's "a blesséd thing" if an easy redemption, a redemption I'm more willing to see, I've realized recently, now that I'm a parent (a status I avoided for much of my adult life), now that I'm accustomed to the feeling of looking in on a sleeping child (though I'm always surprised at the *depth* of that feeling). But it wasn't children I was walking among and I'm father to only one child; I was nobody's guardian here, I was (if anything) a voyeur. Sleep's a kind of nakedness, maybe that's obvious. All of our bodies lying there, in conjunction, alive, exposed. But I felt a burst of something beyond the erotic, beyond my bad reaction to the boys in the bar car, past the racial: I thought of the trust implicit there among these strangers I was wading through—and recalled that I was one of them on the trip out, asleep and likely snoring next to a woman named Leslie whom I'd just met—and knew that nobody was anybody's guardian, and was moved.

I've continued to travel this year, for a variety of reasons, and time has recently been more of an issue than it was when I went out West on the train in October; in short, I've spent a lot of time in the air in the last couple of months. A few weeks ago, as I was going through the security check at the airport in San Jose, I realized that there are no metal detectors at either Amtrak stations or Greyhound depots. San Jose has a small air terminal but still there were the armed guards to frisk you and the X-ray technology for your carryons, things we've gotten used to. In regard to train and bus travel, though, my thought is that everyone has tacitly agreed or realized that a bomb going off on such a conveyance could have no political advantage for anyone, could hold no national consciousness hostage: if one's to be a successful terrorist one needs to threaten a transport system carrying a percentage of rich folks. In the

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sleeper back from Portland my fellow travellers, like my dinner companions, seemed to be lower-middle-class people, at least in style and affect. All but me were white, the black people sticking to the coaches. The porter moved among us letting down beds, bringing newspapers, being available—he was friendly to us all but I thought the friendliness seemed forced. Industry tradition dictates that porters, in addition to being black, be nice guys, at least while they're working; I figure the nice guy part of that combination is included in the job description but I don't know how one competes to be a porter nowadays, how much is unstated. I don't know what it pays or what it costs, only how it appears. Their counterpart in on-the-job temperament would be, I suppose, the women who work for the airlines, the stewardesses. At least in appearance.

Airlines, though, attract a wider range of travellers. On my flight out of San Jose I found a family of Mexicans travelling with shopping bags occupying the bank of seats that I thought I'd been assigned to. Actually, through a complicated series of accidents, I'd been bumped up into the next cabin, into first class itself, on that flight; I was an interloper there on the other side of the curtain, in finally among the white Republicans. I stretched out in the lap of leather-upholstered luxury, ordered a yuppie beer, and gazed around at my cabin-mates; the Mexicans had been friendly as we'd shrugged together over the mysteries of seating but these people did not look back at me. I took stock of my situation, noting the similarities and differences. Many of my fellow-fliers that afternoon were plump though they were wearing good clothes, ones that made fat less of an obvious issue; and their opinions were not emblazoned in print on their chests but were announced on the covers of their copies of *Forbes* and *National Review*—I suppose, though, that the slogans used to sell those journals are no less predictable than the ones available on sweat shirts at K-Mart. The hair, however, was a little better than what I'd seen on Amtrak; I remembered that young upper-class people (and here I'm drawing from my years of part-time teaching at an Ivy League university) tend to do rather little to their hair aside from cutting it: these were their parents and grandparents with me in the incredibly clear air over California and beautiful Oregon, subscribing to a similar aesthetic.

The stewardess who'd brought me my beer came down the aisle handing out damp, warm washcloths so that we might prepare ourselves for lunch. I was hungry—I'd missed breakfast that day—and was looking forward to eating in first class having suffered through airline food for the several previous "dinner flights" when I'd been ensconced back in Economy with the other riffraff. On an Air B.C. flight in February I'd simply declined the meal when it was offered, much to the shock of my seat-mate, a pleasant young white man from South Africa. "But it's included in the price of the ticket," he whispered.

Eating dinner on Amtrak, though, is a pleasure, even when it's extra. I also think that it's the moment at which the promise of some luxury and the realities of train travel most often cross paths. It's not that I'm

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seduced by the beckoning, smiling photo spreads in the Amtrak brochures; I ride, I suppose, because my father taught me (by example, by emphasis) to have an affinity for it—it's something wordless and basic and both connected to the metaphors and beyond them. Yet I do know luxury when I taste it. A few weeks ago—after having flown from Seattle to Chicago—I got on the Texas Eagle for the two hour trip down to my town; the train left Chicago at 6:00 and at 6:30 the dining car steward announced over the P.A. system that he was about to commence walking through taking dinner reservations and that he'd be going through the Pullmans first. Realizing that I'd never get a seat before we arrived in Bloomington-Normal if I didn't go outside the stated order of things—I was on a coach—I hunted him up and asked if he could squeeze me in somewhere. He looked at me, looked at his list, frowned, and said Maybe. I returned to my seat in the coach then but shortly afterwards I heard my first name called over the P.A. system: I was being asked to "report to the dining car." Would this have been different if I'd been a polite white man asking a favor? I doubt it, I think the end-product, the bottom-line, whatever anyone wishes to call it, would probably have been the same. But what I imagine would be different for the white guy would be the asking itself, the weightless experience of the interracial encounter. What's at stake here, beyond what you get to eat or not eat for dinner? We bring all of what the culture says we are and have been to each one, each encounter, and that's like a gyroscope in a box, it's a terrible and shifting weight to have to pass around, a rolling burden to bear through a conversation. Status is tricky when we meet out there in the instability, out at the bendable edges of our roles. In the dining car, I joined a friendly older suntanned couple on their way to Arkansas and a quietly hip young pale woman going someplace in Texas, Austin or Houston. We talked easy travel talk and I had the red snapper, a fish my mother's mother had often made for us, as we passed through Dwight, Illinois, where one of the big state prisons is.

Over Oregon the stewardess reappeared at the front of the first class cabin with a steamy plate of turkey and dressing in each hand. Or I think it was turkey and dressing: she brought me a tray with a plastic-wrapped turkey roll sandwich on it, apologizing that they hadn't bumped me up early enough for the airline to order the extra first class lunch. She was sympathetic and charming about it, speaking in a low voice, wrinkling her nose, apparently actually pained at having nothing better to feed me—no one could have accused that woman of being rude. And no one looked at me as I unwrapped the sandwich and ate it. It was my riffraff self, my inescapable Economy being having caught up with me, my status being served to me. "I yam what I yam," said the Invisible Man. I was hungry; and it didn't taste nearly as bad as it looked like it was going to.

C. S. GISCOMBE

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DENIS DONOGHUE

Eliot's "Marina" and Closure

The poem, first:

Quis hic locus, quae regio, quae mundi plaga?

What seas what shores what grey rocks and what islands
What water lapping the bow
And scent of pine and the woodthrush singing through the fog
What images return
O my daughter

Those who sharpen the tooth of the dog, meaning
Death
Those who glitter with the glory of the hummingbird, meaning
Death
Those who sit in the stye of contentment, meaning
Death
Those who suffer the ecstasy of the animals, meaning
Death

Are become unsubstantial, reduced by a wind,
A breath of pine, and the woodsong fog
By this grace dissolved in place

What is this face, less clear and clearer
The pulse in the arm, less strong and stronger—
Given or lent? more distant than stars and nearer than the eye

Whispers and small laughter between leaves and hurrying feet
Under sleep, where all the waters meet.

Bowsprit cracked with ice and paint cracked with heat.
I made this, I have forgotten
And remember.

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The rigging weak and the canvas rotten
Between one June and another September.
Made this unknowing, half conscious, unknown, my own.
The garboard strake leaks, the seams need caulking.
This form, this face, this life
Living to live in a world of time beyond me; let me
Resign my life for this life, my speech for that unspoken,
The awakened, lips parted, the hope, the new ships.

What seas what shores what granite islands towards my timbers
And woodthrush calling through the fog
My daughter.[1]

I. Preliminaries

A poem that takes as its title the name of a character in Shakespeare's *Pericles* and begins with an unattributed epigraph in Seneca's Latin is apparently not for the uninstructed or for that illiterate reader whom Eliot sometimes hoped to address. It is for initiates. This is not to say that "Marina" would be lost on an illiterate reader. We cannot make that assumption. Such a person might enjoy an experience of the poem beyond the reach of literates or aslant from it. But it is vain to imagine that any of us could erase what we know—however little we know—for the sake of becoming enablingly unlettered. It is too late. Like many readers of the poem, I first came to it in a college course. There is no merit in pretending that I can project myself into the state of mind of someone who has never read a word of Seneca or of Shakespeare. The university is now the only scene in which Seneca, Shakespeare, and Eliot may be considered together. I have loved the poem for many literate years.

"The theme is paternity; with a criss-cross between the text and the quotation," Eliot told E. McKnight Kauffer in July 1930.[2] Kauffer provided the illustration for "Marina" when it was first published, so presumably he wanted Eliot to be more explicit than he normally was about his work. In a postscript to a letter of

[1] T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York, 1952), p. 72.
[2] Quoted in James Olney (ed.), *T.S. Eliot* (Oxford, 1988), p. 211.

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May 9, 1930 to Sir Michael Sadler, on the occasion of presenting the draft of "Marina" to the Bodleian Library, Eliot developed the reference:

> I intend a criss-cross between Pericles finding alive, and Hercules finding dead—the two extremes of the recognition scene—but I thought that if I labelled the quotation it might lead readers astray rather than direct them. It is only an accident that I know Seneca better than I know Euripides.[3]

We deduce from the title and other internal evidence that the implied speaker is Pericles and that the poem corresponds to the great Recognition Scene, Act 5 Scene 1, in which Marina is presented to him. Pericles can't trust his eyes and must convince himself that she is indeed his daughter, born at sea, long lost, and given up as having been murdered by those in whose charge she was left. He has not seen her for many years; she is now a young woman. "But are you flesh and blood?", he asks her, and "Have you a working pulse?" (Lines 154–155). A few moments later, with drowning and restoration still in mind, Pericles says to Helicanus:

> O Helicanus, strike me, honour'd sir;
> Give me a gash, put me to present pain;
> Lest this great sea of joys rushing upon me
> O'erbear the shores of my mortality,
> And drown me with their sweetness . . .
> (Lines 192–196)

Hearing or reading this speech, we recall the greatest Recognition Scene in Shakespeare, Act 4 Scene 7 of *King Lear*, when Cordelia says to her distracted father—"Sir, do you know me?"—and Lear answers, "You are a spirit, I know: when did you die?" In both cases the father undoubtingly perceives a spirit but he has to persuade himself—or be persuaded—that the spirit is also flesh, blood, and working pulse, an "embodiment without argument," as Charles Tomlinson writes in one of the poems of *The Return*. Eliot justly admired the Recognition Scene of *Pericles* and de-

[3] Quoted in Richard Abel, "The Influence of St.-John Perse on T.S. Eliot," *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. XIV, No. 2, Spring 1973, p. 235.

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scribed it as featuring "the speech of creatures who are more than human, or rather, seen in a light more than that of day."[4]

The second thought—"or rather"—doesn't erase the first one. In "Marina," as in Shakespeare's last plays, we hardly know how to describe the personages even though they come to us complete with names and histories. If we begin with them as persons, we have to acknowledge the sense in which they are "more than human." Prospero is a person, a sequestered prince, alive in the time and place he has left, just as much as in the island on which he lives. But he is more than a person in the powers he commands, his relation to the natural world, Ariel and the other spirits. For the past two thousand years, Prospero and his like have been versions of Christ, even when they resemble Christ in no other respect but their being at once human and more than human. That is one way of putting it, if we start with Prospero and Pericles as men. But it is also possible to start with them as spirits, lesser gods, and see them now as incarnate. The analogy with Christ still holds, the god become man, Word become flesh. In the first version we start with body, time, place, earth; and we see these suffused with radiance and we hardly know what we make of the radiance, it is as miraculous as Christ's changing water into wine. We see history become myth. In the second version we start with myth, power, and miracle, and we wait for it to become personal, historical, bodily. "What men or gods are these?", Keats's witness to the figures on the Grecian urn asks. It would make a difference if he said, "What gods or men are these?"

Eliot often recurred to this doubleness. In one of the Clark lectures he adverts to it as a quality of Chapman's plays:

> Here and there the actors in his drama appear as if following another train of thought, listening to other voices, feeling with other senses; and acting out another scene than that visible upon the stage . . . In *The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois*, for example, there runs the curious theme of reconciliation, quite inconsistent with the motives and intentions of the personages, but never ludicrous, because it seems to belong to another plane of reality from which these persons are exiles. Even in the splendid final outburst of the dying hero of the previous play—

[4] From an unpublished lecture, quoted in Elizabeth Drew, *T.S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry* (New York, 1949), p. 127.

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> Fly, where the Evening from th' Iberean vales,
> Takes on her swarthy shoulders *Heccate*
> Crown'd with a Grove of Oakes: flie where men feele
> The burning axletree: and those that suffer
> Beneath the chariot of the Snowy Beare:
> And tell them all that *D'Ambois* now is hasting
> To the eternall dwellers . . .

—it seems as if he, or Chapman through him, is conversing with an immaterial audience.[5]

Eliot's several references to this double vision in Chapman and in Dostoevski alert us to a similar emphasis in "Marina." We may approach it as a nuance of genre. "Marina," like *Pericles*, is a romance. Following Hawthorne's account of romance but exceeding it in subtlety, Henry James wrote of the genre in the Preface to *The American*:

> The only *general* attribute of projected romance that I can see, the only one that fits all its cases, is the fact of the kind of experience with which it deals—experience liberated, so to speak; experience disengaged, disembroiled, disencumbered, exempt from the conditions that we usually know to attach to it and, if we wish so to put the matter, drag upon it, and operating in a medium which relieves it, in a particular interest, of the inconvenience of a *related*, a measurable state, a state subject to all our vulgar communities.[6]

"The real," James says, "represents to my perception the things we cannot possibly *not* know, sooner or later, in one way or another." The romantic, on the other hand, stands "for the things that, with all the facilities in the world, all the wealth and all the courage and all the wit and all the adventure, we never *can* directly know; the things that can reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and our desire."[7] But we still have to say how, in "Marina," exemption from the inconvenience of conditions is achieved, and the difference such exemption makes.

Generically, "Marina" is a romance; formally, it is a dramatic monologue, the speech of a person in a particular context. But

[5] T.S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. by Ronald Schuchard (New York, 1993), pp. 151–152. (Schuchard has corrected Eliot's misquotations of Chapman's play.)

[6] Henry James, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces*, with an Introduction by Richard P. Blackmur (New York, 1962 reprint), p. 33.

[7] Ibid., pp. 31–32.

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the relation between Eliot's speaker and his context is not, as it mostly is in dramatic monologues, circumstantial and contingent. In Browning, Fra Lippo Lippi lives contiguously to the "fig-skins, melon parings, rinds and shucks" to which he refers: he coincides with his conditions and inserts himself strenuously among them. We find him where we find them, in their vulgar communities. But in "Marina" we are aware of seeing the speaker's life in a light more or other than that of day, and we wonder where the light comes from. It may be directed upon the speaker from another perspective than his. The word "grace" implies a gift, even if it is not thought of as divine, a supernatural gift bestowed by God upon the soul for its salvation. Or the light may be the speaker's own, a feature of his conviction that the meaning of his life must be sought elsewhere than in the rigmarole of its circumstances. Either way, it is characteristic of Eliot's early poems that the speakers, the *personae*, are related to their conditions but do not coincide with them. In some degree these figures stand apart from their circumstances, and it is the main purpose of Eliot's language to make them hover between their existence and their aspired-to essence. Eliot is not a novelist, or inclined to a realist disposition: there is always a shadow surrounding his figures that holds them apart or adrift from their circumstances. We never see them as individuals, as if they had lives before and after the poems in which we discern them. We intuit them rather as presences indistinguishable from their words, figures hovering in the circuit and subterfuge of their thoughts, fears, and desires. In "Marina," Pericles' mind is in that respect abstract, but not abstracted. Wallace Stevens says that the fictive abstract does not exist but that it is "as immanent in the mind of the poet as the idea of God is immanent in the mind of the theologian."[8] But there is no reason to think of abstraction as a sign of the speaker's disgust with the ordinary world, although that is what we are often told. Worringer claims that the impulse to abstraction arises from "a great inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world," and that in this unrest "life as such is felt to be a disturbance of the aesthetic enjoyment."[9] But it could be argued

[8] *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. by Holly Stevens (New York, 1966), p. 434.
[9] Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, trans. by Michael Bullock (London, 1953), pp. 15, 24.

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just as persuasively that the impulse arises from a conviction that the ordinary world, rich as it is in every other respect, cannot provide a valid perspective upon itself and its processes. To achieve such a perspective, the speaker must stand aside from his ordinary life and try to see it in another light than that of day. The capacity of abstraction is such a light, and Stevens makes a large humanist claim for it when he refers to "an abstraction blooded, as a man by thought."[10] Eliot's speaker tries to see his life not as he lives it moment by moment but as he conscientiously examines it. The determination to examine it is what F.R. Leavis ascribed to the Eliot of "Ash-Wednesday" and other poems in its vicinity, "a searching of experience, a spiritual discipline, a technique for sincerity—for giving 'sincerity' a meaning." The mark of such an effort is Eliot's "discipline of continence" in approaching familiar terms and concepts.[11]

II. Reading the Poem

The epigraph is a line from *Hercules Furens.* Driven mad by Juno, Hercules kills his wife and children. He falls into a swoon and when he begins to come to his senses he looks about in bewilderment and says: "*Quis hic locus, quae regio, quae mundi plaga?*" Or in the Elizabethan translation that Eliot liked well enough to write about it: "What place is this? what region? or of the world what coast?"[12] But the translation makes the line more interrogative than it is in Latin, where without a verb it has rather the force of an exclamation. It becomes an unequivocal question only in the next line, "Ubi sum?" In "Marina" the two lines from Seneca become one longer sequence: it retains an echo or an aura of exclamation even when it becomes a question with the verb "return":

> What seas what shores what grey rocks and what islands
> What water lapping the bow

[10] Wallace Stevens, *The Palm at the End of the Mind,* ed. by Holly Stevens (New York, 1972), p. 212.

[11] F.R. Leavis, *Education and the University: A Sketch for an "English School"* (London, second edition, 1948), pp. 88–89.

[12] T.S. Eliot: "Introduction" to *Seneca: His Tenne Tragedies,* ed. by Thomas Newton (London, New York, 1927), p. 46.

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> And scent of pine and the woodthrush singing through the fog
> What images return
> O my daughter.[13]

These words "suffice to compel the recognition they precede," as Eliot writes in "Little Gidding" of other formidable words. They could be read as a question to which Pericles' daughter Marina might be supposed willing to give an answer; but not necessarily. Or they might be spoken in a tone of wonder, hardly distinguishable from rapture, upon which no answer should intrude. The rhymes of syntax—"What seas . . . What water . . . What images"—hold in place the middle line which is quite different in character. That line—"And scent of pine and the woodthrush singing through the fog"—extends the note of rapture not into a phalanx of particulars that might stay in one's mind when the line has been displaced by the next one, but into sensory events which remain, in the most intimate and internal respects, events of language. Relations among the words, as so often in Eliot, take precedence over the references the words also make. It is as if the words began as phonemes and went on to assent to the further experience of meaning and reference. Marking the stretch of alliteration from "scent" to "singing," and the assonance of "pine" and both syllables of "singing," we register the consanguinities of sound which also make the line expressive of the sound of sense. In the next lines the old, dead life from which the new hoped-for life is to be differentiated is ascribed to Pericles' former selves—"Those" who have lived the living death of four of the deadly sins must be manifestations of himself according to different emphases of interrogation and rebuke. They are not, I think, other people. Pericles must be seen walking within the gloom of his own shadow and calling it Death. Otherwise he might justly be told to mind his own business and attend with due humility to the state of his soul. The lines, in their studied formality, are a ritual, an undoctrinal correlative to the Christian sacrament of penance:

> Those who sharpen the tooth of the dog, meaning
> Death

[13] T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York, 1952), p. 72.

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Those who glitter with the glory of the hummingbird,
meaning
Death
Those who sit in the stye of contentment, meaning
Death
Those who suffer the ecstasy of the animals, meaning
Death

Are become unsubstantial, reduced by a wind,
A breath of pine, and the woodsong fog
By this grace dissolved in place

The method, here and throughout the poem, is—as Marianne Moore described it:

> lean cartography; reiteration with compactness; emphasis by word pattern rather than by punctuation; the conjoining of opposites to produce irony; a counterfeiting verbally of the systole, diastole, of sensation—of what the eye sees and the mind feels; the movement within the movement of differentiated kindred sounds, recalling the transcendent beauty and ability, in "Ash-Wednesday," of the lines:
>
> . . . restoring
> One who moves in the time between sleep and waking, wearing
>
> White light folded, sheathed about her, folded.
> The new years walk, restoring
> Through a bright cloud of tears, the years, restoring
> With a new verse the ancient rhyme. . . .[14]

But it may still be asked, of this Death-scene, whether the repudiation of world and sin hasn't been achieved too easily. Leavis claimed "that the mundane actuality, the world of inescapable death, is elsewhere in the poems of the phase less easily dismissed." I assume he had "Animula" in mind, where

The heavy burden of the growing soul
Perplexes and offends more, day by day;
Week by week, offends and perplexes more

[14] Marianne Moore, "A Machinery of Satisfaction," *Poetry*, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 6, September 1931, p. 338.

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With the imperatives of "is and seems"
And may and may not, desire and control.
The pain of living and the drug of dreams
Curl up the small soul in the window seat
Behind the *Encyclopaedia Britannica.*[15]

The reduction of mundane life to unreality in Eliot's other poems of this period, Leavis thought, "is a different affair, having nothing of enchantment about it, and the unreality is not absence."[16] But the burden of the lines from "Marina" is not chiefly "the world of inescapable death"; it is escapable sin. We are given four of the deadly ones—Anger, Pride,[17] Sloth, and Lust, in that unusual order. Some readers have been scandalized by the four-times-insisted-on Death, but they have no good reason. Eliot's recourse to the tone of the Morality Play in that passage is made in a long sentence, sustained across the white space between the subjects—the repeated "Those"—and their verb. It is a mark of his poetic genius that the energy of the sentence lifts it, before it ends, to the earned sublimity of "grace." For a comparable act of faith we have to go to George Herbert's "Easter-Wings":

With thee
O let me rise
As larks, harmoniously,
And sing this day thy victories:
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

Here the internal rhyme of "shall" and "fall" propels the alliterative movement of "fall" and "further" into the "flight" of Easter-wings and soul and Resurrection. In "Marina" the liturgical procession of Death is the ground of the later beseeching, the gift of grace with its hope—short of a promise—of redemption.

[15] T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York, 1952), p. 71.

[16] Leavis, *supra*, p. 90.

[17] A draft of "Marina" gives the bird of Pride as a peacock rather than a hummingbird. Robert Crawford has noted in his *The Savage and the City in the Work of T.S. Eliot* (Oxford, 1987, pp. 21–22) that one of Eliot's sources is this passage of Mayne Reid's *The Boy Hunters: Adventures in Search of a White Buffalo* (1853): "Listen to his whirring wings, like the hum of a great bee. It is from that he takes his name of 'humming-bird.' See his throat, how it glitters—just like a ruby." (p. 110)

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The next lines give the Recognition Scene, and it is appropriately close to the one in *Pericles*: the face to be recognized is conjured from the rhyme of "grace" and "place":

What is this face, less clear and clearer
The pulse in the arm, less strong and stronger—
Given or lent? more distant than stars and nearer than the eye

Leavis takes this passage together with the next two lines, though the spacing in any editions I have seen would keep them separate, at whatever cost to the grammar:

Whispers and small laughter between leaves and hurrying feet
Under sleep, where all the waters meet.

The face, as Leavis notes, "doesn't belong to the ordinary experience of life in time, and the effect of a higher reality is reinforced by the associations of the last two lines—associations that, with their potent suggestion, characteristic of some memories of childhood, recur so much in Eliot's later work."[18] I take it that the series of questions, featuring a hovering between less clear and clearer, less strong and stronger, given or lent, more distant and nearer, assents to the rhythm of alternating perception and an incipiently strengthening conviction. Christopher Ricks has written of the Ariel poems as "between-poems," and of "Marina" as the one in which "the energies of animosity are at once acknowledged to be substantial and believed to be so transcendable that they can 'become unsubstantial.' "[19] Not merely, as he notes, "insubstantial." Graham Martin has emphasized "the way the prepositions of place promise a kind of concreteness, a location for the laughter, which the nouns at once withdraw."[20] But no such promise has quite been made; none broken or withdrawn. We are responding to a strange quality of Eliot's poetic language, its observance of other duties than that of denotation. Quoting a passage from "Burnt Norton"—

[18] Leavis, *supra*, p. 91.
[19] Christopher Ricks, *T.S. Eliot and Prejudice* (London, 1988), p. 234.
[20] Graham Martin, *Eliot in Perspective*, p. 114. Quoted in Ricks, *supra*, p. 213.

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> . . . dignified, invisible,
> Moving without pressure, over the dead leaves,
> In the autumn heat, through the vibrant air

—A.D. Moody perceives that "there can be no simple flow of feeling in such double vision, where what is most real is not real to sense, and where what is actually seen would contradict it."[21] Eliot's language makes the visible hard to see, and it compels us to divine in its phrasings something that can be felt as presence or pressure but not delivered in evidence. In "Marina" "between" and "under" offer to specify relations between entities which are themselves dissociated: it would be alien to the spirit of the lines to ask whose whispers, precisely, whose laughter, whose feet, or whose sleep. The pointedness of the qualifying clause, "where all the waters meet," makes it sound more indicative than it is: that place is not to be found on a map. These and other phrases in "Marina" do not refer to objects real or even notional. The main quality of the words is palpability, not transparency of reference. Verisimilitude is not sought. So the words and phrases are best received as marking the rhythm of rise and fall, assertion and concession. Nothing as steady as affirmation is entailed; everything is suggestive, tentative. This is "poetry as incantation," a mode that Eliot responded to, with some misgiving, in Poe, Tennyson, Swinburne, and Mallarmé.

It is surprising that the spacing of the lines that follow runs together two phases of a spiritual movement we might have regarded as separate:

> Bowsprit cracked with ice and paint cracked with heat.
> I made this, I have forgotten
> And remember.
> The rigging weak and the canvas rotten
> Between one June and another September.
> Made this unknowing, half conscious, unknown, my own.
> The garboard strake leaks, the seams need caulking.
> This form, this face, this life
> Living to live in a world of time beyond me; let me

[21] A.D. Moody, *Thomas Stearns Eliot: Poet* (Cambridge, 1979), p. 186.

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> Resign my life for this life, my speech for that unspoken,
> The awakened, lips parted, the hope, the new ships.

Here Pericles, like another Phoenician sailor Phlebas, passes the stages of his life and youth, rising and falling, entering not Phlebas' "whirlpool" but a deeper acknowledgement of his responsibility. As in other poems, Eliot translates the terms of moral responsibility into the language of consciousness, "Made this unknowing, half conscious, unknown, my own." So much a syllable can do, enabling crucial changes of purpose and direction while evading further specificity. In that line the to-and-fro of consciousness links the first two subjective conditions acoustically with the second pair ascribed to the object, the ship according to Eliot's allegory of ship and shipbuilder. In the end the feeling reaches the committed stability of "unknown, my own," corresponding to "the hope, the new ships." Pericles' "let me / Resign my life for this life" is an offer he is not obliged to act upon. Such a sacrifice is a minor version of Christ's self-sacrifice on behalf of humanity, but Pericles does not need to give up his life so that Marina may come into her own. In Shakespeare's play she sufficiently comes into her life by regaining her mother Thaisa and her father: there is also her husband-to-be, Lysimachus. Pericles does not have to die to secure these blessings for his daughter. It is enough that Eliot's Pericles is willing to do so, if need be, or that he feels the propriety of an old man dying and a beloved daughter moving into the new life of marriage. The motive is common to Eliot's sense of memory in "Little Gidding":

> . . . This is the use of memory:
> For liberation—not less of love but expanding
> Of love beyond desire, and so liberation
> From the future as well as the past. . . .[22]

Some readers have wondered whether Marina is to find the new life in this world or the next. In an early review of the poem William Empson spoke of "the balance maintained between otherworldliness and humanism." The essence of the poem, he said,

[22] *The Complete Poems and Plays*, p. 142.

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> is the vision of an order, a spiritual state, which (the speaker) can conceive and cannot enter, but it is not made clear whether he conceives an order in this world to be known by a later generation (like Moses on Pisgah) or the life in heaven which is to be obtained after death (like Dante):
>
> One might at first think the second only was meant, but Marina, after all, was a real daughter; is now at sea, like himself, rather than already in the Promised Land; and is to live "in a world of time beyond me," which can scarcely be a description of Heaven. At any rate, the humanist meaning is used at every point as a symbol of the other-worldly one; this seems the main point to insist on in a brief notice because it is the main cause of the richness of the total effect. In either case the theme is the peril and brevity of such vision.[23]

Otherworldliness and humanism are not the right terms; they propose the wrong question. No one who believes in the Incarnation could accept Empson's version of the choice. Time, by the birth of Christ, became redeemable: that is the ground of a Christian's belief. In "Marina" and "Journey of the Magi" Eliot is using the common words for time and place, landscapes and seascapes, journeys and returns, words for playing-cards and kings and queens, and testing them to see how far they can also suggest states of beatitude and the obstacles to such states. He is seeing these words, too, in a light greater than that of daylight and ordinary denotation. Dante is his example in deriving from the finite world such intimations of Heaven and blessedness as his poetry needs.

The last three lines of the poem resume the first five, and conclude it as an exclamation rather than a question. But even more pointedly than "between" and "under," the last preposition of place, "towards my timbers," has the directive force of a verb, as if in anticipation of the woodthrush "calling through the fog":

What seas what shores what granite islands towards my timbers
And woodthrush calling through the fog
My daughter.

[23] William Empson, *Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture*, ed. by John Haffenden (Iowa City, 1987), p. 356.

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III. Closure

I want now to consider "Marina" in the context of a debate that has arisen from time to time on the question of closure. Normally the word "closure" is taken as referring to "the *functions* of an ending: to justify the cessation of narrative and to complete the meaning of what has gone before."[24] A debate on this issue might well have started—but didn't—when James wrote the Preface to *Roderick Hudson*:

> Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so.[25]

Such appearances are closures. They raise a critical issue, not because a work of literature has to end somewhere but because the concept of a satisfactory ending is not innocent, it touches upon ideological questions about the way a life should be in relation to the different way it is. The debate on this question moved into a recognized phase with such works as Robert Martin Adams' *Strains of Discord* (1958), Sartre's "Question de methode"—the Preface to his *Critique de la raison dialectique* (1960)—Umberto Eco's *Opera Aperta* (1962), Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* (1967), Julia Kristeva's *Semeiotike: Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (1969), Roland Barthes's *S/Z* (1970), and Leo Bersani's *A Future for Astyanax* (1976). I shall not resume those interventions, but I should note that Kermode's book has been especially influential in arguing that people need "fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and poems."[26] Since the publication of *The Sense of an Ending*, there has been an intermittent argument about this need, whether it is produced by nature or by instruments of social construction, and how it is fulfilled or thwarted in the endings of particular literary works. It is my understanding that the argument has been hampered by a terminological problem. Edward Said argues, in *Beginnings*, that we should be concerned with beginnings rather than with origins,

[24] D.A. Miller, *Narrative and Its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Princeton, 1981), p. xi.
[25] James, *The Art of the Novel*, *supra*, p. 5.
[26] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (New York, 1967), p. 7.

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because beginnings are historical and origins are mythical. It would be convenient if we could make a similar distinction in regard to endings. We might deem closure to mean the deliberate act of a writer in bringing a fiction to a particular conclusion and thereby prescribing a certain configuration of values. We might then think of an end as featuring a writer's sense of the teleological conclusion implied, without his intervention, in the fictive situation as it appears. Stevens' "The Course of a Particular" ends with a phrase—"until, at last, the cry concerns no one at all"[27]—which implies that the poem has ended by itself because there is nothing more to be said. The end seems to be in the nature of the case, so it is an end, not a closure. But that is a distinction without much difference: a writer who proffered the end as teleological would merely be using that as a further rhetorical ploy.

In practice, some of the writing about closures and endings has been fairly uncontentious. Charles Olson's manifesto "Projective Verse" (1950) associates closed form with print and open form with breath: his recommendation of "composition by field" is furthered by its being based on an analogy with the human body. But Olson is merely stating a preference, associating himself with a particular tradition in American poetry from Whitman to Williams. He is not accusing the adepts of closed form of having a disgusting agenda. Barbara Hernstein Smith's *Poetic Closure* is a study of the ways certain poems end and how convincing those endings are, but again she bears closure no animus. Marianna Torgovnick's *Closure in the Novel* and David Richter's *Fable's End* examine the endings of various novels and try to resolve the problems of interpretation they entail. What do we make, for instance, of the ending of *The Golden Bowl*: do we read it as marking Amerigo's assent to Maggie, Maggie's victory over Amerigo, or as indicating the embrace of a shade by a shade? Does the ending embody what Yeats recommended as holding "reality and justice in a single thought"? What about the two endings of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the four endings of *The Tenants*? D.A. Miller's *Narrative and Its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (1981) questions whether closure—the occurrence of "an ultimate signified to which everything in

[27] Stevens, *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, p. 367.

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the text eventually speaks"[28]—is possible, and wonders why we want to find in literature such signifieds, such definitive acts of naming.

But the question of endings has also given rise to contention. In "Le Texte clos" and other essays Kristeva has argued that "all ideological activity appears in the form of utterances compositionally *completed.*"[29] In *Le Texte du roman* she maintains that during the late Middle Ages, from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, thought based on the sign gradually replaced thought based on the symbol. The novel developed from this change. The symbol was a function of the universals from which it depended, hence it enforced transcendental closure and referred by virtue of a law to the object it denoted. The sign does not claim to be coordinate with universality or transcendence; one sign is sustained by another, so each is a vehicle of material openness. Kristeva associates *l'écriture* with *cloture* and *la parole* with *ouverture*:

> *L'écriture n'apparaît que pour clore le livre, c'est-à-dire le discours. Ce qui l'ouvre, c'est la parole.*[30]

She has also endorsed Bakhtin's description of 'dialogic' as a carnivalesque transgression, an escape from the closure of the Law of One—"*Dieu, la loi, la définition.*"[31]

Kermode has maintained, without producing much evidence, that emphasis on "spatial form" in modern literature—an emphasis common to G. Wilson Knight, Joseph Frank, and several other critics—has had sinister political implications, because of its cultivation of closed, intemporal values. He seems to think that spatial form embodies a desire for the authority of closure; comparable, though he hasn't been explicit on this point, to the motives at work in symbol rather than sign, in Kristeva's terms. For similar reasons John Guillory has reflected upon Cleanth Brooks's *The Well-Wrought Urn* and the presentation of works of literature as autonomous structures. Jacques Derrida has made an invidious comparison between two modes of interpretation. One

[28] D.A. Miller, *Narrative and Its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Princeton, 1981), p. 280.

[29] Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. by Leon S. Roudiez (Oxford, 1980), p. 55.

[30] Julia Kristeva, *Semeiotike: Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (Paris, 1969), p. 141.

[31] Ibid., p. 151.

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of them "seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering, a truth or an origin which is free from freeplay and from the order of the sign, and lives like an exile the necessity of interpretation." The other, "which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms freeplay and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology—in other words, through the history of all of his history—has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the game."[32] There have also been many attacks on the assumptions of "organic form" in literary theory.[33] The same motive is at work in those critics—notably Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man—who claim moral advantage for allegory at the expense of symbol. On the evidence of *A Future for Astyanax* and later books, Bersani evidently resents any work of literature that subjects human desire to formal constraint, or presents it as submitting to social or other assimilation.

The common object of attack in these instances is unity. Those who repudiate the apparent stability of a closed form resent the implication that if unity is possible in literature and art it may also be possible in life; that Yeats's "Unity of Being" may not be a wild fancy. Instead of an endless play of signifiers, it may be feasible to trust the values which have been embodied in an ascertained perfection of form. This is a scandal for critics who see good faith only in the accepted fluidity of arbitrariness and chaos, the promiscuity of desire, the "modernist tendency to formal openness and psychological mobility."[34] Bersani and other critics practice what Blackmur called "techniques of trouble," devices to make trouble for themselves and others. In a special issue of *Yale French Studies* on the question of closure, David Hull claims that interest in closure arises from "a modern intellectual climate characterized by decenteredness, isolation and absence of meaning (both in the world and in language)."[35] But he doesn't question this ideology of climate.

[32] Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (eds.), *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man* (Baltimore and London, 1970, 1972) pp. 264–265.

[33] These are judiciously treated in Murray Krieger, *A Reopening of Closure* (New York, 1989).

[34] Cf. Miller, *supra*, p. 280.

[35] *Concepts of Closure: Yale French Studies*, No. 67 (1984), p. iv.

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IV. The Poem Again

My references amount to a mere sketch of the argument about closure, but they are enough to let us revert to "Marina" as a case in point. The poem seems to proclaim its closure: its end is an epitome of its beginning, the movement is circular. An impression of closure is also strengthened by the fact that the poem is a reverie linking the three sentient acts which Augustine outlines in Book XI of the *Confessions*. "The present of past things is the memory; the present of present things is direct perception; and the present of future things is expectation."[36] Nothing in "Marina" falls outside the scope of these three: the poem moves freely but not arbitrarily among them, as among the categories of past, present, and future. If we regard the line from Seneca as setting the key signature for what follows or as providing the motif of bewilderment leading to recognition, then the poem moves from the present tense to the past to the future and back to the present. In any of these versions the finishedness of the poem seems clear.

But in another sense the poem is not at all closed. At every point it is porous to ambiguity. Just as "grace" may be supernatural or natural, a gift or a contingency, so "Those who sharpen the tooth of the dog, meaning / Death" may refer—I concede—to one sinful self of a man's many selves, or to sinful humanity as such, or to sinners other than the speaker. I have a preference among those choices, but any one of them is sustainable. The phrase "meaning / Death" may describe what "Those" sinners intend to do to others, or it may denote what they constitute, in the scheme of deadly sin, by virtue of their actions. "Less clear and clearer . . . less strong and stronger . . . given or lent . . . more distant than stars and nearer than the eye" may mean that the impression of "less" arises from Pericles' sensory power and the impression of "more" attends his growing faith. But it may not: it may refer to the wavering, coming-and-going nature of his sensory capacity. Empson has further possibilities in view:

> There may be some doubt as to whether *less clear and clearer* is said of the *face* (than what, in that case: than itself, so that the vision wavers

[36] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. by R.S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth, 1961), p. 269.

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> and seems unreal; than the *grace*, so that it is only a metaphor of the unseen glory and yet somehow strengthens it; or than the sensual persons, the normal world, so that it is affirmed to be more real than they, though a vision) or of the *pulse in the arm*, which is at once more and less *clear* and *strong* than the *face*; in this case it is the vision of the *face* which causes an exhilaration, a sense of renewed youth, which is more certain than the reality of the vision, though dependent on its reality; and though certain is yet a sort of mirage in that it is not he who is made young and strong, it is the daughter with whom he is in such sympathy as to share her youth, in the discovery of her by which she seems as it were to be reborn.[37]

"Small laughter" may mean gentle, like the "small rain" in "Westron Wind," or barely audible, or the laughter of children among the leaves. "Between one June and another September" may indicate that Pericles made the ship between June and the September of the following year, or the September of a still later year. It may go, like the time of pregnancy, from September to the following June. Or it may mean that the rigging became weak and the canvas rotten in some indefinite interval. And the last words—"My daughter"—may be what Pericles thinks the wood thrush is calling or they may be what he says, having no need to say anything more, to his daughter.

Indeed, if we take seriously the analyses of words in Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* and *The Structure of Complex Words*, it is hard to see how any literary form can be said to be closed. If an ambiguity is, as Empson says, "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language,"[38] it would be bold to think that any work of literature is at every point unambiguous or closed. Emma marries Mr. Knightley rather than Frank Churchill, whether a particular reader rejoices in that conclusion or not. Jane Austen has taken the decision. But many of the local intimations of *Emma*, word by word, remain equivocal; they are not closed off or otherwise immune to interpretation. It is up to each reader to decide, for instance, how important and far-reaching it is, for Emma's marriage, that she has lied to Mr. Knightley about her earlier feeling for Frank Churchill. Or that she has attached herself to Mr. Knightley mainly because she has watched Harriet doing so

[37] Empson, *Argufying*, p. 359.
[38] William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (Norfolk, third edition, 1953), p. 1.

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and is impelled to develop the same trajectory of feelings more majestically in herself. Jane Austen may want to close the story or—much the same thing—to bring it to a firm and just conclusion, but it is not possible to achieve this in any decisive sense, words being as hospitable as they are to diverse values and weightings. The psychological form of this porousness is recognized in this sentence from *Emma*:

> Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken.[39]

But the reason for this is linguistic before it is psychological. Even if a writer or a speaker intends to give up the security of closure by a formal act of disclosure, it is impossible to know precisely what or how much has been disclosed. It is not a matter of disguises and mistakes but of the profuse character of words and the rules they don't abide by. Even if a poem is as well-wrought as Donne's urn, it can't prevent the proliferation of meanings and intimations, if only because the words are necessarily stained by the innumerable contexts in which they have already appeared. That, I take it, is what Empson means by saying that poetry is "an essentially suggestive act."[40] He speaks, too, of English syntax in its "natural condition of ambiguity and squalor,"[41] but that is a vivacity. English is not supposed to have squalor as a defect. It may be said that Eliot is interested in "the echoes and recesses of words," as Dryden according to Empson wasn't,[42] but Dryden's language has its ambiguity, as Empson shows. Even if the words on the page are not evidently ambiguous, as Empson shows they are in, say, Yeats's "Who Goes with Fergus?", particular readers can't be forced to interpret them one way rather than another. A teacher or a critic normally tries to persuade readers to see the merit of a particular interpretation, but assent can't be counted on. Or shouldn't be.

In fact, if we want to see instances of closure, we have to consult the everyday world, not literature or art. Closure is what law,

[39] Jane Austen, *Novels*, Volume 4, ed. by R.W. Chapman (London, 1932–34), p. 431.
[40] William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (Norfolk, Conn., 1953 edition), p. 62.
[41] Ibid., p. 75.
[42] Ibid., p. 199.

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government, accountancy, science, and administration insist on. We do not need to go to totalitarian forms of government for proof: democratic forms will do, though not as well as a dictator's decree. The values we find in literature are for the most part those which cannot survive in the enforced precisions of public life: they are antinomian to that life, as Walter Pater liked to report. That is why one is justified in feeling tender towards them and wanting them to survive in the beautiful circuits and subterfuges of poetic form.

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WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

Responding to Blake

Twenty-five years ago, with the war in Vietnam and turmoils on the home front, William Blake stood—at least among the more literarily inclined—for everything that was good and holy, to be enlisted in the struggle against oppression here and abroad. For example, in 1971, when Allen Ginsberg and Robert Duncan addressed a writing class at Kent State University a year after the murders there, Ginsberg sang Blake's "The School Boy" to the assembled students while accompanying himself on the harmonium. He and Duncan told the class that both school and war were prisons forced upon us by society, and that there was a way to get out of those prisons. Would-be graffiti artists of the time, and there were plenty, found Blake an endless source of replenishment, from Everything that lives is holy, to The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom, to Energy is eternal delight. At my own college a colleague offered a new, semester-long seminar in Blake's final prophetic book, *Jerusalem*; while at least one undergraduate, an almost totally inarticulate young man, was rumored to be deep into Blake and—like Ginsberg (who had his first vision of Blake in 1948 after "idly masturbating")—probably in direct communication with the master.

It's not clear what congruence, except in time, the heroicizing of Blake on a popular, antiestablishment front bore to the critical scholarship the academy had been devoting to him, especially since the Second World War. That period (1946-1970) saw, among other contributions, Mark Schorer's ambitious attempt to place Blake historically and intellectually, and David Erdman's extensive research into the popular and historical circumstances in which his art developed. There were many books about the shorter poems, perhaps most notably by Robert Gleckner, E.D. Hirsch, Hazard Adams, and Stanley Gardner. Most dauntingly, there were the interpretive attempts to make more available the prophetic books as objects of reading and study—notably

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Northrop Frye's *Fearful Symmetry* (1947) and Harold Bloom's *Blake's Apocalypse* (1963). Frye's massively original study of Blake's symbolism and his relation to earlier English poets, particularly Spenser and Milton, is still an astonishing achievement in literary scholarship. (Its opening sentence—"This book offers an explanation of Blake's thought and a commentary on his poetry"—is one of the great deadpan statements of modest purpose.) Bloom's "study in poetic argument," as he subtitles his book, traces such argument with special reference to "the major poems"—to *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*. Though a much less witty writer than Frye, Bloom agreed with him that the poems are "major" Blake and not just in length. "This is poetry of the highest order," he says about *Jerusalem*, "because every syllable in it bears the almost intolerable pressure of an inward torment that the poet is not content to express as such but insists on transvaluing into a universality of artistic process." (The critic himself clearly aspires to "major" status.) Now as the century nears its close, there is no visible abatement in the Blake industry, with his graphic designs, politics, religion, sexuality, and mythical proclivities all receiving intensive treatment.

When the news came through that the English novelist Peter Ackroyd had been paid an enormous sum by a publisher (Sinclair-Stevenson) to write biographies of Dickens and Blake, it seemed the right time for a new, comprehensively informed biography of Blake (Alexander Gilchrist's biography of him was published in 1861; Mona Wilson's in 1927).[1] In many ways Ackroyd, consummately professional and fluid writer that he is, does not disappoint. He sets down the events of Blake's life in a more than sympathetic spirit; his reconstruction of Blake's London couldn't be better. (In his own novels and in the Dickens book, Ackroyd has already shown how thoroughly inward he is with London.) Blake's techniques and art-historical aspects are minutely described. As I shall go on to suggest, the treatment of the poems is not as full or satisfactory, although Ackroyd's admiration for them is patent. Yet overall the book felt like a bit of a trudge—though much more compact than the Dickens biography—and at its end I wondered just what, in fact, I had learned of new importance about Blake. It was good to pretend to

[1] BLAKE: A Biography, by *Peter Ackroyd*. Alfred A. Knopf. $35.00.

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have "the life" gathered up, as it were, into this handsome, lavishly illustrated volume; yet, exactly what need does it serve? Should people read a biography of Blake? Shouldn't they rather be trying to read the poems?

One can't deny the force of Ackroyd's sustained commitment to describing in detail Blake's procedures and methods as a draftsman, an engraver, and a producer of "relief etchings" in which copper plate is painted rather than engraved. These descriptions are highly informed, but in fact, as someone unfamiliar with the techniques and materials of graphic production, I am a sucker for anyone who sounds as if he knows whereof he speaks. Consider these sentences in partial description of the way Blake worked on copper plate as if it were a sketch pad:

> His first step was to cut out plates from a large sheet of copper, using a hammer and chisel, and to prepare the surface for his labours upon it. Then he made out a rough design with white or red chalk and, with that as his guide, he used a camel-hair brush to paint the words and images upon the plate with a mixture of salad oil and candle-grease. This mixture resisted the aqua fortis (of vinegar, salt armoniack, baysart and vert de griz purchased from the local druggist) which bit into the surrounding plate for three or four hours. . . . After that time the words and images stood up, and stood out, as part of one coherent design.

There are further references, in the paragraph on quills, to a "conventional printer's ball of cloth," to "burnt walnut oil," "burnt linseed oil," "Whataman paper," "colour pigment" and "carpenter's glue." Ackroyd really relishes, so it feels, these descriptions, as he does the particularities of the engraving workshop Blake was apprenticed to for seven years under James Basire. There he worked twelve hours a day, six days a week, surrounded by "iron pots for the boiling of the oil, pans for warming the copper plates, tallow candles, racks of needles and gravers, fine linen cloths to strain the varnish, vessels for mixing the aqua fortis . . . old rags, pumice stones, feathers." Yet the effect of such particularity, in one sense admirable for the way it brings us in close to Blake's compositional techniques, is also—at least to this uninitiated reader—baffling: the more I'm told about how Blake went about his graphic procedures, the more I'm convinced of their inaccessibility to me.

Ackroyd notes that while Blake was the poet of eternity he was

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also the poet of late eighteenth-century London, and there are memorable vignettes in the biography of chimney sweepers, of the Gordon "No Popery" riots, of a London "built in the shadows of money and power." Blake's art, Ackroyd claims reasonably enough, is an art "entranced by the scenic and spectacular in a city that is filled with those great London forms, spectacle and melodrama," with the "energy and variety" that he (a "Cockney visionary," Ackroyd calls him) brilliantly perceived. So the biography is itself a kind of spectacle, given body and color by the scores of plates (both black-and-white, and colored) that diversify and animate the text. Ackroyd tends to emphasize Blake's differences from rather than his similarities to members of the radical artistic-political circles he knew—Fuseli, Mary Wollstonecraft, Tom Paine, Priestley and Godwin and so on. He notes that Blake has been called many things, such as "a Shakespearean populist, a Platonist, an anarchist, a Christian reactionary, or a quietist"; but he is less interested in classifying Blake than in insisting on his uniqueness as a prophet of the imagination, as an artist. Readers who want more searching argument about exactly what kind of radical Blake was, will go elsewhere: most recently to E.P. Thompson's *Witness Against the Beast* (1993) or Michael Ferber's *The Social Vision of William Blake* (1985).

Having said this much about the biography, I will turn to Blake's poetry, in particular to some claims made about it by critics from this century. My interest is centered on the shorter poems: the early *Poetical Sketches*, the *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, and the poems from the Rossetti and Pickering manuscripts. This interest has grown out of my attempts—as a non-specialist teacher of English romantic poets—to see what can be said about the Blake who is often thrown in with Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, and who is harder to teach than any of them. By "hard" I don't mean just that the prophetic books are forbidding—which they are, even after Frye and Bloom—but that Blake's shorter poems present a unique challenge to criticism. In this respect, Ackroyd's book gives little help, although there is a revealing moment when, prepared to discuss *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, he speculates that Blake "might not have wanted to come too close to himself, in case he did not care for what he found there"; therefore that "he felt the pressing need to express

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himself and yet at the same time to frame doubts about the nature of that expression by making it ambiguous, satirical or impersonal." This is properly conjectural, but the adjectives point to a central aspect of the poems as well as accounting for the wide interpretative divergences that surround them.

The names of neither T.S. Eliot nor F.R. Leavis appear in Ackroyd's bibliography, yet—though not "Blakeans"—their remarks about the poet are full of useful insight. Eliot's short essay, published in *The Sacred Wood*, is an oddly fascinated response to a poet one might think Eliot would have been wary of. And so he was, at least to the extent that he called Blake's honesty "terrifying," while claiming that his best work had "the unpleasantness of great poetry." Although Eliot seldom descended to particulars and certainly failed to back up his claims, he had strong praise for the Blake of *Poetical Sketches* and *Songs* along with strong reservations about the prophecies insofar as they had fallen under the domination of Blake's "ideas." In depreciating those ideas, Eliot set himself against Yeatsian reverence toward Blake's symbolic philosophy and against later critics like Middleton Murry who (in Murry's words) set out to "elucidate [Blake's] doctrine." (Frye and Bloom, for all their emphasis on individual poems, would also be mainly concerned with elucidating that doctrine.)

In his occasional pronouncements about Blake, Leavis was also wary of the "doctrine," even as (in "Justifying One's Valuation of Blake," 1972) he argued in the strongest terms for Blake's greatness as a poet. Leavis was uneasy with Eliot's emphasis on Blake's "technique" (although, as Eliot himself said, one can't say where technique begins or where it ends), and he saw Blake as a man of genius who, in the eighteenth century, altered expression. Like Eliot, Leavis admired things in the early *Poetical Sketches* such as "My silks and fine array," "To the Muses," "Memory, hither come" and "Mad Song." But when Leavis comes up against an actual Blake poem, even one of his own choosing, he has trouble knowing what to do with it. His appendix in *Revaluation* (1936) on "Hear the Voice of the Bard," from *Songs of Experience*, is, to say the least, confusing. In "Justifying One's Valuation of Blake" he tells us that "The Tyger" "exhibits marked complexity," that it can't be paraphrased, that it makes an "immediately compelling imaginative impact," but that it conveys no "protest"; rather it "constates." I sympathize

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with Leavis in walking carefully round such a strange and formidable poem as "The Tyger," but find more immediately useful, as an indicator of why Blake is hard to read, a remark Leavis made some years previously in "Literature and Society" (*The Common Pursuit*, 1948). There he referred to the "peculiar kind of difficulty that [Blake's] work offers to the critic," and called it "the difficulty one so often has in deciding what kind of thing it is one has before one." As illustration, Leavis quotes the four-line epilogue to *For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise* (one of Blake's illuminated printings) titled "To The Accuser who is The God of This World":

> Truly My Satan thou art but a Dunce
> And dost not know the Garment from the Man
> Every Harlot was a Virgin once
> Nor canst thou ever change Kate into Nan
>
> Tho thou art Worshipd by the Names Divine
> Of Jesus & Jehovah: thou art still
> The Son of Morn in weary Night's decline
> The lost Travellers Dream under the Hill

I am quoting, as Leavis couldn't, from the Erdman-Bloom *Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (1988), whose capitalizings and lack of punctuation (except for that unhelpful colon in the second stanza) make the "kind of thing" this poem is even more weird. Leavis says it has "curiously striking qualities" and clearly comes from "a remarkable poet" but that it also shows "lack of self-sufficiency as a poem." This seems, in its ambiguity, the right way to recognize Blake's oddity, his insidious success at making us memorize his poems when we don't understand them. (Since I can't understand it, I can at least memorize it.)

But Leavis' most notorious, and probably his earliest reference to Blake comes as the final sentence-paragraph of his essay, "The Irony of Swift." After measuring Swift and finding him wanting ("He is distinguished by the intensity of his feelings, not by insight into them"), he delivers the coup de grâce: "We shall not find Swift remarkable for intelligence if we think of Blake." An infuriating thing to say, by way of departing from an essay, but it was extremely perceptive of Leavis to link together these two

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ironists from the beginning and the end of the eighteenth century. Still, it strikes me as strange to think of Blake, as Leavis prompts us to, as distinguished for intelligence because he possessed insight into his feelings—as Swift didn't into his. Keats or Byron, to some extent Wordsworth, might be judged to have possessed and expressed "insight" into their feelings: but Blake? In his wholly unapologetic performances in verse and prose, Blake was too busy knowing the world, its institutions and inhabitants, to have the time to develop insight into his "feelings." "One of the ghastly, obscene knowers," D.H. Lawrence called him (who, as himself a know-it-all, should know). It is the affiliations, rather than the differences between Blake and Swift, which become more credible when we consider the following, extremely rich formulation in Frye's *Fearful Symmetry*—he is speaking of Blake's early satire "An Island in the Moon," but the formulation extends to much of Blake's work: "One may wonder," Frye writes, "whether Blake's sense of the grotesque, of broad caricature and ribald parody, was really a minor quality . . . whether satire was not his real medium, whether in the long run he was not of the race of Rabelais and Apuleius, a metaphysical satirist inclined to fantasy rather than symbolism." This seems to me the single best thing ever said about Blake's poetry, but its implications turn me away from rather than towards the later prophetic works where the fantasy tries to be truth and where the satirist loses his cool.

Satire, ambiguity, fantasy rather than symbolism—if these are truly the elements of *The Songs of Innocence and Experience* (the earlier *Poetical Sketches* are more uniform in tone), then how can the critic best serve them? Perhaps by not interpreting and elucidating too confidently, by not pronouncing too finally on the "kind of thing" the individual poem is. I have in mind, as instances of all-too-confident elucidation, Harold's Bloom's accounts in *The Visionary Company* and in *Blake's Apocalypse*, and will demonstrate my point by quoting—from the latter book—his analysis of "Holy Thursday," one of the *Songs of Innocence*:

> 'Twas on a Holy Thursday, their innocent faces clean,
> The children walking two & two in red & blue & green,
> Grey-headed beadles walk'd before, with wands as white as
> snow,

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Till into the high dome of Paul's they like Thames' waters flow.

O what a multitude they seem'd, these flowers of London town!
Seated in companies they sit with radiance all their own.
The hum of multitudes was there, but multitudes of lambs,
Thousands of little boys & girls raising their innocent hands.

Now like a mighty wind they raise to heaven the voice of song
Or like harmonious thunderings the seats of Heaven among.
Beneath them sit the aged men, wise guardians of the poor;
Then cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from Your door.

Bloom writes as follows about the poem:

> On Ascension Day the charity children are led into St. Paul's to celebrate the charity of God, that loving pity of which human charity is intended as a direct reflection. The voice of this song is not a child's, but rather of a self-deceived onlooker, impressed by a palpable vision of Innocence, moved by these flowers of London town. The flowing metre is gently idyllic, and the singer gives us two stanzas of Innocent sight, followed by the triumphant sound of Innocence raising its voice to Heaven.
>
> The ambiguity of tone of Blake's songs is never more evident than here, and yet never more difficult to evidence. One can point of course to several disturbing details. The children's faces have been scrubbed clean, and are innocent, in a debased sense—because they ought to appear brutalized, which they are, and yet do not. The children are regimented; they walk two by two, and the beadles' wands are both badges of office and undoubtedly instruments of discipline in a savage British scholastic tradition. The children are dressed in the colors of life; the beadles are grey-headed and carry white as a death emblem. It is the fortieth day after Easter Sunday, forty days after Christ's ascension into Heaven, yet the children, his Lambs, still linger unwillingly in the wilderness of the exploiting society. Though they flow like Thames' waters, this is not a mark of their freedom but of the binding of the Thames, which is already the "chartered" river of the poem "London" in *Songs of Experience.*

There is more to Bloom's interpretation, but perhaps this is enough to suggest the great distance of such interpretation from what I call "responding to Blake." Bloom claims to find "ambiguity of tone" in this, and in other of Blake's songs: yet what is most evident in his own commentary is its utter lack of ambiguity, as he tells us what the poem really means. The children "are innocent, in a debased sense"; the beadles' wands are "undoubt-

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edly instruments in a savage British scholastic tradition"; the children "linger unwillingly" in "the wilderness of the exploiting society"; the waters of the Thames are identical to the "chartered" Thames of "London"; most important, the narrator of the poem is a "self-deceived onlooker"—whereas the critic-interpreter is wholly undeceived, has taken (presumably) the precise measure of things.

In fact, aside from a quick reference to "flowing metre" as "gently idyllic," Bloom seems uninterested in listening to "Holy Thursday," is indeed quite impervious to its climactic and thrilling moment when

> Now like a mighty wind they raise to heaven the voice of song,
> Or like harmonious thunderings the seats of Heaven among.

Here is where, if any place, "ambiguity" asserts itself, as Blake sweepingly makes claims for the power of the children's voices, their "innocent hands," their "multitude" as a "multitude of lambs." To "understand" all this as the self-deceiving reflections of an inadequate speaker, actually makes the poem a good deal less strange and less disturbing than it is without such a convenient fiction. And it makes Blake's satire less wild, more precisely controlled, than at least this reader feels it to be. "Holy Thursday" first appeared in Blake's "An Island in the Moon," where—in a completely unprepared-for moment—it is sung by a character named "Obtuse Angle." (Other characters proceed to sing other Blake songs.) In "An Island in the Moon" the contrast was between the silly-satiric prose context and the sudden exciting break into song; in *Songs of Innocence*, "Holy Thursday" incorporates satire and lyric side by side, even simultaneously, in such a way as to defeat the reader who tries to make clear sense out of it, even as we find ourselves singing along with the verse.

This sort of satire (ambiguity is no better a word for it) animates the best of Blake's songs, as well as *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, surely the most brilliant and wickedly humorous of the prophecies.[2] It bears out Richard Poirier's quite daring suggestion, in his *Poetry and Pragmatism*, that, for those who like to

[2] Perhaps the best, and not well-known, account of Blake's fiercely satirical propensities in the *Songs* is found in Thomas R. Edwards' *Imagination and Power* (New York, 1971), pp. 141-159.

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"vocalize" their reading—who pay attention to the sounds and rhythms of Blake's verse—"The meaning of the piece of writing . . . is in the perceived difficulty of securing one." In those terms, the trouble with the later prophetic books is that their difficulty, experienced in overlong, often arid, stretches of Blakean fourteeners, presents itself as something to be figured out afterwards: elucidated, rather than held in the mind and ear. One thinks of the dull stretches of Pound's *Cantos* that may yield to explication but not to imaginative experience; and indeed Pound put Blake in the Hell of Canto XVI: "And the running form, naked, Blake, / Shouting, whirling his arms, the swift limbs, / Howling against the evil, / His eyes rolling." Like Pound, Blake wanted to know everything, and eventually persuaded himself that he did.

One of Blake's oddest and most memorable poems is a ballad from the Pickering Manuscript hardly anyone talks about (Ackroyd makes no mention of it). Titled "William Bond," it begins with a stanza that only Blake—or perhaps some pop lyricist—could have contrived:

> I wonder whether the Girls are mad
> And I wonder whether they mean to kill
> And I wonder if William Bond will die
> For assuredly he is very ill

The poem relates how William went to church one morning attended by three Fairies, but the Fairies were driven away by Angels of Providence, and William returned home in Misery, in "a Black Black Cloud," took to his bed, attended by the Angels of Providence and by his sweetheart Mary Greene and his Sister Jane. Mary asks William whether there is "another" he loves better than her, and William admits to it—"For thou art melancholy Pale . . . But she is ruddy and bright as day"—at which point Mary falls down in a faint. The poem then concludes:

> When Mary woke and found her Laid
> On the Right hand of her William dear
> On the Right hand of his loved Bed
> And saw her William Bond so near

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The Fairies that fled from William Bond
Danced around her Shining Head
They danced over the Pillow white
And the Angels of Providence left the Bed

I thought Love lived in the hot sun shine
But O he lives in the Moony light
I thought to find Love in the heat of day
But sweet Love is the Comforter of Night

Seek Love in the Pity of others Woe
In the gentle relief of anothers care
In the darkness of night & the winters snow
In the naked & outcast Seek Love there

As with "Truly my Satan," the difficulty is in deciding the kind of thing one has before one, a difficulty not quite solved by calling it a ballad. It helps to recall Northrop Frye—satire, ambiguity, fantasy rather than symbolism—and helps even more to experience the wonderful discovery made by whoever speaks those last two stanzas, the "I" that might be William Bond or William Blake or maybe just some lucky onlooker, like you or me, but with the audacity to end a poem with three stresses—"Seek Love there."

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BRUCE BAWER

Politics, the Media, James Fallows, and Me

One afternoon this spring I turned on CNN to find myself staring at a grimly remarkable sight. A large military transport plane had just landed at a Delaware air force base. Facing the plane, their backs to the camera, were two long, neat parallel rows of parked hearses. The reverse shot showed rows and rows of people seated in an open hangar facing the cars and the plane.

In voice-over, two CNN Washington reporters explained the situation. The bodies of Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown and others who had died with him in the Bosnia plane crash had just arrived on American soil. The survivors of most of the victims were present, as was President Clinton, who would be saying a few words.

Over the next hour or so, I watched in awe as the most dignified government or military ceremony I'd ever seen in this hemisphere unfolded. It began when a string of forty or fifty servicemen marched briskly up a ramp into the plane, disappeared into it, and emerged moments later, marching with slow dignity and carrying several flag-draped coffins as a military band began to play "America," also with slow dignity. The men carried these coffins to the first several hearses, slid them in, then strode back to the plane and came out with more coffins, which they carried to the next few hearses while the band played the hymn tune "Diademata." As the sky slowly darkened over the tarmac, more coffins were borne out to the strains of the hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy," and then more to "Abide with Me." The music was beautiful and perfectly apt, the soldiers impressively poised. The stateliness of it all was extraordinary: the ceremony spoke eloquently of the nobility of human life and national service, the horror of death, and the human need to find meaning and continuity in ritual. It was succeeded by some brief, moving remarks by President Clinton.

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Watching this spectacle on TV was a powerful experience. Yet the emotional effect at times came very close to being shattered by the two off-screen reporters, who were chatty, lively, animated—even giggly. Gratuitously, they yammered on about Brown's career, repeating things that anyone who watched the evening news regularly had heard a dozen times in recent days. When they broke away for a commercial, the military band's solemn hymnody gave way to an insipid CNN musical tag that sounded like the score of a maudlin TV movie.

CNN's contributions to the broadcast, in short, were grotesquely inappropriate. Why, I wondered, couldn't they just let the event speak for itself? The answer, of course, was the same as always in such circumstances: the press's habit of sheer arrogance. The reporters felt compelled to mediate the event for us—even if it didn't need mediation, even if their mediation amounted to desecration. Not that the word "desecration" appeared to be in their vocabulary. To them, this solemn ceremony was just another Washington event, to be discussed in the usual glib, shoot-from-the-hip, inside-the-Beltway manner.

Listening to the reporters' patter, moreover, you might almost forget that anyone other than Ron Brown had died on that plane. As Washington insiders, the reporters could talk easily about Brown, but had virtually nothing to say about the business leaders who had died with him (many of them CEOs of major corporations) and about the potential impact of *their* deaths. (The situation would have been much the same had a Cabinet member been killed along with, say, America's twenty greatest writers, composers, artists, surgeons, or educators.) In talking about Brown, furthermore, the reporters emphasized not his contributions as a government official but his role in Clinton's 1992 campaign and in a recent scandal. Their speculations about the consequences of his death centered not on the changes that might ensue at the Commerce Department but on the effect it would have on Clinton's reelection chances. I had never paid much attention to Brown's career, but it seemed tacky and diminishing to turn this occasion into yet another excuse to speculate about the 1996 elections. You'd think the reporters were on the set of "Meet the Press" or "Face the Nation," not at an air force base crowded with coffins.

Not that these reporters' conduct represented any great depar-

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ture from the journalistic norm. On the contrary, it exemplified the problem that, according to James Fallows, the author of *Breaking the News: How the Media Undermine American Democracy*,[1] lies at the heart of what's wrong with political reporting today—the fact that even intelligent, perceptive journalists develop a habit of viewing the world in a narrow, shallow way, as a collection of "stories" whose ultimate significance is always political. Faced with a life that has ended in an untimely way and with presidential oratory about truth, honor, public service, and life's higher meanings, this habit can manifest itself in ways that seem shocking to an ordinary viewer. As Fallows puts it, "The natural instinct of newspapers and TV is to present every public issue [and, one might add, every event involving government figures] as if its 'real' meaning were political in the narrowest and most operational sense of that term."

2

These are times of extraordinary social, cultural, and political changes in America and around the world. Yet serious examination and sustained analysis of these changes in the national media can be difficult to find. Instead of viewing journalism as public service or viewing the intelligent consumption of responsible journalism as a civic obligation, too many of those who call the shots in the news media have capitulated to the notion that news should be entertaining and should speak to viewers' immediate personal (and, especially, pecuniary) concerns. (Thus the tendency of evening-news anchors nowadays to introduce stories by suggesting that they are about "a rising threat to *your* family," "what the government is doing with *your* tax dollars.")

The national media is also, as Fallows points out, increasingly trend-happy and inclined to cover serious social and cultural developments by running superficial, personality-driven "human-interest" stories. When a heavily hyped book on bisexuality was published a few months ago, *Newsweek* announced to the world that bisexuality was hot, and ran a cover story focusing on the

[1] BREAKING THE NEWS: How the Media Undermine American Democracy, by *James Fallows*. Pantheon Books. $23.00.

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personal lives of a few self-identified bisexuals. Is there really such a thing as bisexuality? *Are* more people identifying themselves as bisexuals? Why? What are the social implications of this? These and other relevant questions were left almost completely unexplored.

Two weeks later, taking note of Michael Lind's cogent examination, in his book *The Next American Nation*, of the cultural separation of the affluent, Ivy-educated "overclass" that runs the nation's major institutions (including the mainstream media) from the rest of America, *Newsweek* covered this story by compiling a list of the "Overclass 100," a catalog of successful people in various fields, complete with photos and thumbnail biographies. The question of social class in America was almost entirely ignored, and a serious issue was turned into an excuse for a ridiculous collection of "who's hot, who's not" personality profiles. It was a classic case of a magazine colossally missing the point (and, incidentally, itself demonstrated just how out-of-touch the "overclass" can be).

Fallows, who serves as Washington editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, correctly cites the "overclass" story as one example of what's wrong with the news media today. *Newsweek's* "roster of assorted 'achievers,'" he observes, "immediately distracted attention from the concept [of the 'overclass'] itself. The magazine's editors—and their competitors at *Time* and *U.S. News and World Report*—could tell themselves, '*That* story has been covered' and move on to something else. All they had really done is use up the novelty of the concept without helping readers understand what it might mean." So it is, notes Fallows, that the media "trivialize issues before they have a chance to be developed, tested, and explored. An idea becomes faddish, it is featured in newsmagazines and TV segments, and then it becomes passé—without ever having passed through the stage of serious attention."

Fallows' emphasis is largely on the Washington press corps, which he effectively indicts on several counts, including their emphasis on "predictions" of the sort offered up at the end of every broadcast of "The McLaughlin Group"; the questionable practice by many high-profile political journalists of taking huge lecture fees from tobacco companies, professional associations, and other institutions with vested political interests; and the almost universal inclination of public-affairs talk show producers

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to turn every discussion of a complex issue into a colorful, simplistic contest between opposing ideological extremes.

Apropos of this last complaint, Fallows argues that in the news media today, "issues that affect the collective interests of Americans—crime, health care, education, economic growth—are presented mainly as arenas in which politicians can fight. . . . By choosing to present public life as a contest among scheming political leaders, all of whom the public should view with suspicion, the news media help bring about that very result." And if it's not fighting politicians, it's fighting pundits. Fallows quotes Jonathan Alter of *Newsweek* on contemporary journalism's "hyper-adversarialism," which is, Alter says, "driven by the TV shows. . . . You get two people who are adversaries and watch them fight. The more they fight, the better TV it is. It conditions people to be adversarial—and unlike in the law, this kind of adversary process is not even useful. It's adversarialism as pure sport."

3

I've had may own up-close-and-personal experience with the "Crossfire"-style approach to the discussion of public issues. After my book *A Place at the Table: The Gay Individual in American Society* appeared in 1993, I was interviewed by dozens of print journalists and on scores of TV and radio shows. Some of these interviews proved worthwhile. On a few public-radio and local radio programs, I found myself engaged in a useful discussion of issues with an informed interviewer who had actually read my book and pondered the questions it raised. These hosts, whose own views ranged across the political spectrum, let me take time to develop points, to answer questions in depth, to get to the heart of the matter. There was some disagreement, but it was not overplayed: the purpose of these interviews was not to showcase the drama of sparks flying but to increase the public's understanding of a complex issue. Indeed, my book—which attempted to chart a moderate course between the extremes of queer-left radicalism and the antigay right and to reconcile reasonable people on both sides—hardly lent itself to a polarized debate.

That didn't stop the powers that be at some of the other (and generally flashier) talk shows that I was booked on, however. It

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was explained to me some days in advance of my planned appearance on one well-known national TV program that it would be a one-on-one interview—just me and the program's host. Then, on the day the show was to be taped, someone from the show called to explain that the format had been changed and that there would be another guest whom I was expected to "debate."

I recognized the guest's name immediately. He was an outrageously right-wing columnist who was not a thinker but a hatemonger and ideological propagandist. His opinion on any given issue was always thoroughly predictable. And this was exactly what made him so attractive to the producers of such shows: he was the natural right-wing half of any "Crossfire"-style setup. Whatever the issue, you knew where he would stand. It was clear from his last-minute booking what the producers had in mind: a face-off at the OK Corral between two points of view that were as far apart as could be. This, I knew, wouldn't serve to illuminate anything for viewers; instead, it would just encourage them to root for their "side."

I explained to the woman why I thought a "debate" between me and the columnist was *not* a good idea. She was unimpressed, and made it clear that I didn't have a choice. I told her that in that case, I would not be doing the show.

There was a silence on the line. She didn't immediately understand what I meant.

"I mean I'm not doing the show," I said.

I gathered from her response that this sort of thing simply didn't happen. Especially with non-big shots such as myself. National figures fought to get a slot on a show like hers, and allowed themselves to be jerked around all over the place. Who was I, a nobody, to dare to turn it down? Didn't I want to hawk my book? She seemed not only surprised and put out, but genuinely offended, by my decision.

The ultimate sacrilege in America today is not being willing to do *anything* to get on television.

4

One of the earliest examples of the contemporary media's reduction of issues to their extremes was the old "Point Counter-

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point" segment on "60 Minutes," in which conservative James Kilpatrick took on liberal Shana Alexander. At the time, their arguments seemed so vulgar and cartoonish that "Saturday Night Live" instituted a takeoff of the segment, with Dan Aykroyd regularly addressing Jane Curtin as "you ignorant slut." Recently, as if the media didn't already have enough of these predictable "Crossfire"-style match-ups, "60 Minutes" revived the segment under a new title. On the premiere installment, "conservative" Stanley Crouch was pitted against "liberal" Molly Ivins. I don't remember the topic—but then, as Fallows points out, the idea of these set-tos is not to make memorable points about a subject but to send sparks flying. Now, both Crouch and Ivins are gifted writers and original thinkers whom I've often found myself agreeing with and learning from; but the "60 Minutes" format forced both of them to assume stale, simplistic, standard-issue ideological positions. Their predictable exchange, which lacked the fresh analytical insight of their best writings, was redeemed only by the wit and style of their presentation.

As Fallows argues, what such formats ignore is that most Americans are somewhere in the middle on most issues. By routinely highlighting the views of ideological extremists and obliging non-extreme thinkers to assume a narrowly "conservative" or "liberal" position on any given issue, many public-affairs programs have helped to create a political environment where the middle ground on many issues can often be imperceptible and where the opposing sides can seem so fanatical and unbending that there can appear to exist no possibility of compromise or conciliation. In such an artificially polarized political culture, civic-minded Americans can feel compelled either to choose between equally unpalatable extremes or simply to retreat from interest in political issues altogether. Thus have the media contributed to the public's cynicism toward and indifference to politics and its contempt of politicians.

5

Another practice that Fallows rightly scorns is the peculiar way in which newsmagazine stories tend to be put together. One or more researchers at various places around the world interview

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people and hunt up information, then pass their material on to a writer (usually at a desk in New York) who composes the piece. A newsmagazine veteran explains to Fallows what's wrong with this process: "When I write articles I have also reported, I know how hard it is to get the nuance right. It's so much easier to write from other people's reporting. You simply care less if it's accurate. And while the best pieces, in a deep sense, are ones in which you're writing from your own reporting, it is much easier to write 'well' in the sense of superficial style when you're not wrestling with the shadings and complications you've seen through reporting. The pieces I've written that fit most smoothly into the newsmagazine style are the ones I didn't report."

Indeed, newsmagazine pieces are often not the result of journalists exploring a subject in order to learn about it and figure out what needs to be said about it, but are rather about putting sensational spins on "hot" topics and sending people out into the field to collect quotations that can be dropped in at appropriate places. A while back I spent a couple of hours talking to a researcher who was working on a newsmagazine article about the gay-rights movement. A few minutes into the conversation, it became clear that she knew almost nothing about the subject aside from the misguided spin that the actual writer of the piece apparently planned to put on it. I clarified some points for her, but her questions made it plain that she didn't get it. Worse, she didn't *want* to get it, because getting it would mean abandoning the simplistic picture she'd been given of the subject and of me—and thus threatening the article's predetermined "hook." From her point of view, my role was not to help her understand the subject better and help the author back at the office to formulate a thesis, but rather, in the course of our long interview, to say one or two things that, wrenched out of context, might fit neatly into a slick, arresting but essentially false picture of the topic at hand.

6

I disagree with Fallows on one major point. He maintains that the widespread public interest in such political events as the President's State of the Union address and "town meetings"—

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which are *not* mediated by the news media—suggests that Americans want journalism that is more deeply issues-oriented and less narrowly political. I don't know about that. The media give America what it wants, and if America wanted better journalism, it would get it. The public-affairs interview shows that have allowed me to talk seriously and in depth about issues tend to have minuscule audiences; the ones that put a flashy, splashy spin on issues draw big ratings. What Fallows pretty much ignores is that the networks' evening news programs are, in most markets, sandwiched between local news programs and syndicated tabloid fare like "Hard Copy" that make the network news, by comparison, look like the latest issue of *Foreign Affairs*. And yet it's those local and tabloid news shows that the public watches in huge numbers.

Years ago, I was one of a group of young cultural and political journalists who gathered monthly at a New York townhouse. At one of these get-togethers I met someone's guest from out of town who, I was told, had just been hired by a local radio station to host a morning talk show, the first broadcast of which would take place the following day. He was a round man with a booming professional radio voice and an ego as massive as his frame, and he stood in the backyard of the townhouse with a drink in his hand and spouted political clichés as if they were Oscar Wilde witticisms. All his ideas were clearly secondhand, and even his little pet catch phrases had obviously been lifted straight out of the "Continuing Crisis" column of *The American Spectator*. But because he served this warmed-over fare with such an air of self-importance, many of the young writers congregated around him avidly. I was amazed that they didn't see through this fatuous blowhard. What amazes me now, of course, is that I didn't see, as some of them may well have, that this man was exactly what a lot of Americans had been waiting for. That day, if anyone had suggested that Rush Limbaugh would soon be a cult hero and the number-one media force to be reckoned with in the United States of America, I would have roared with laughter.

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STEVE YARBROUGH

Sleet

What she remembers, in the time she allots for remembering, is how cold the house got in winter. She would question the authenticity of that recollection, since she thinks of Mississippi as a hot sultry place; but her sister, who is a year older than she is, remembers those winters the same way. "It must have been the wind," her sister says. "Remember, there was that big empty field to the west?"

"I thought it was south of the house," Kendra says.

"It was west," her sister says. "On the other side of the road. The wind just came howling straight across that field, and I don't think the windows and the doors were well-sealed."

They had space heaters. She remembers how she sometimes climbed out of bed, after Mary Jo had fallen asleep, and sat in front of the heater in their room, staring at the flames. The fire flickered behind radiants made of ceramic fire clay. The radiants were arched like the windows in the sanctuary at the Methodist church, and each one had many little diamond-shaped openings. She remembers sitting there in her pajamas for hours, watching the fire patterns, feeling warm, while a few feet away her sister slept. Sometimes, on nights when their father was home, she'd hear him roll over, the heavy weight of his body making the springs groan.

She remembers the traps they set out, the way they loaded them with stale cheese. Some of the traps were small, maybe three inches long. Others, the ones they placed in the attic, were almost a foot long. She knows that today she would not be capable of removing a furry little body from any sort of trap, no matter what size, but Mary Jo swears they both used to check the traps every morning and that when they found something dead there, they took it out, tossed it into the green garbage barrel out back and reset the trap.

One night—one cold night—when they'd just gone to bed,

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they heard their mother scream. Both of them bolted for the door. Flinging it open, they saw their mother run naked from the bathroom, water dripping from her heavy breasts, water streaming down her back, her legs. Their father followed, a greyish ball dangling from his hand by what appeared to be a string.

He chased her into the living room and, while they watched, he cornered her near the television set. "It's just a mouse," he said. "A dead one. Don't you want to touch it? You like fur."

Their mother stood there dripping, shaking from cold or fear or both. Their father grinned. He took a step closer.

Suddenly the mouse twitched. Hollering, their father dropped it and jumped backwards.

She remembers the way the four of them stood there studying the mouse, which lay, almost flat, on the floor. Its neck had been crushed, the hair behind its head was matted with blood. Yet while they stood there, it twitched again.

You can be moving but dead, she remembers thinking. She believes this was the moment when she lost faith in boundaries, seeing life and the lack of it merge in a ball of fur.

Their father was gone so much because their farm, like a lot of small farms in the Delta, had failed and he'd taken a job selling dictionaries for a company based in Jackson. They still owned their house, though they'd lost the rest of the land, so they were staying there until he could afford to move them down. He came home every third or fourth weekend, bringing his samples with him, one big brown dictionary for grownups and a smaller red one for children.

He was renting a room in a big house on North State Street in Jackson. The people who lived there, he said, were all characters. He'd set Kendra on his knee when he came home and tell her about them.

"There's this one fellow that's the chaplain at Millsaps College," she remembers him saying, bouncing her, running his fingers through her curls. "He's about sixty years old now. You know what happens to you sometimes when you get to be about sixty?"

"You die?"

"Well, you could, but there's other less drastic stuff that happens."

"Like what?"

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"You could lose your teeth."

"*I've* lost a tooth," she says. She opens her mouth to remind him of the gap there.

"Yeah, but you'll grow another one," he says. "When you're sixty and you lose them, that's it. All you can do is get fake teeth, and that's what Reverend Dooley went and did. But you know what happened the other Sunday?"

When she turns around to say *what?* her face grazes his. It's rough, stubbly. She wonders now if that's why stubble on a man's cheek never bothers her. Mary Jo says she can't stand it. Most women can't.

"Reverend Dooley was up preaching his sermon at the campus chapel, talking about sin and damnation, and he got carried away. He started pounding the pulpit and shaking his head, and the next thing he knew, his dentures—that's his fake teeth—were flying through the air. He said they landed right in the organist's lap. He claims he's fixing to retire."

He tells her about Hardy the mechanic. Hardy's wife doesn't like him anymore, he says, so he's had to move into the boarding house. Hardy has problems at work. Her father tells her that the other day Hardy forgot to tighten the oil plug on somebody's Rolls-Royce, a car that costs thousands and thousands of dollars, and the lady who owns the car drove it onto the highway and all the oil emptied out and the engine caught fire. Hardy gets grease on people's brake shoes and when they try to stop their cars they have wrecks.

"Hardy's a mess," he tells her. "Hardy hasn't had a whole lot of success."

She asks him what success is. The black satchel he totes his samples in is standing by his chair. He reaches into the bag and pulls out the red dictionary, the one that's meant for kids. He flips pages until he finds the entry.

"Success," he says. " 'When the plans one has made work out.' "

"Have you had a lot of success?"

"I guess I've had my share."

He says it in what she will come to think of as a matter-of-fact way. It's as if the statement is a straight line running through the middle of his life, like the center stripe on a highway, separating

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what has worked out from what hasn't. He says it as if he thinks that, on the whole, things have balanced.

In her recollections, when she's sitting on his knee, listening to him and occasionally asking questions, Mary Jo and her mother are somewhere close by, in the house certainly, though never visible. It's possible that they're in the kitchen. Today Mary Jo is a terrible cook, at least as bad as Kendra; both of them prefer to eat out, and most nights they do. But Kendra remembers that at one time Mary Jo liked to help her mother cook, and she remembers that her mother cooked a lot of different things and cooked them well, particularly on those weekends when their father came home.

Her mother was at that time a woman who still dressed well, who never went out in the morning until she'd had a bath and put on a nice dress. The pictures taken in those days suggest that she dressed conservatively. Her skirts are long and full. The snapshots are black-and-white, so colors are hard to distinguish, but it doesn't look like she favored loud shades. She's never wearing a lot of makeup in those photos. What she is wearing, more often than not, is a frank friendly smile. She sang in the choir at the Methodist church, and she had friends, other women who always stopped and spoke to her when she and Kendra and Mary Jo went to shop in the Piggly Wiggly. They talked about the things women talked about then—about the need for a traffic light out on 82, the prices of various foods, the new toupee the choir director had worn last Sunday. They talked for hours, it seems like, though it couldn't have been that long.

Every now and then, a really good friend would glance down at her and Mary Jo and then lean close to their mother, her hand held up by her mouth like a shield, and the friend would say something in a low voice. Their mother would glance at them too, and then she'd shield her mouth and lean toward her friend and say something back. And afterwards, when Kendra—never Mary Jo—would ask what they'd been talking about, their mother would say, "Oh, we were just discussing some folks that we know."

"Who?"

"Just some people," their mother would say, paying most of her attention to the shopping cart, which she always pushed down the middle of the aisle, even if someone else was coming toward her; she would hew to the center until the last second, then veer

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reluctantly off to one side. "Just some people who are having a hard time."

The beginning of their own hard times is difficult to place.

Kendra knows when she became aware that something drastic had happened. But she also knows that before the drastic event, there were other, more subtle indications of what Mary Jo calls "drift."

"It's like that Honda I had a few years ago," Mary Jo says. As an adult, she's developed deep attachments to all of the cars she's owned; her estranged husband, with whom she's had an on-again, off-again relationship for almost thirty years, is himself a car salesman. "It got to the point," Mary Jo says, "where you couldn't steer that car at all. The second I realized it had a problem, I knew I'd been seeing signs of it for more than a year."

How long Kendra was aware of similar signs in the life of their family is hard to say. When the bank told her father that it would have to seize most of his land and all of his farm equipment, he didn't seem particularly distraught. The night he came home with the news, they all sat out on the front porch, eating fresh strawberries from their garden and laughing.

"Maybe," she hears her father say, pink juice dripping down his chin, "I'll become an evangelist." He winks at their mother. "Don't you think I'd make a good one? The main thing an evangelist needs is the ability to believe the stories he tells. I can do that. The only other thing he needs is a little bit of charm."

There's a picnic table on the front porch—a table that appears in many photos—and that's where they're sitting. She's on the bench beside her father, Mary Jo and her mother are across the table. It's raining, big drops thudding on the roof like rocks. Their mother reaches over to clasp their father's hand.

"You could charm the fur off a fox," she says. "You could charm anything off anybody."

"I could be a truckdriver," her father says.

Her mother says, "Gitty-up-go."

He snaps his fingers. "I know," he says. "Remember what a curve I had in high school? I could take up pitching. I'm still young enough to make the major leagues. Wouldn't you girls like to see me on TV? Imagine how I'd look on the mound at Yankee Stadium. Dizzy'd be calling my name out every week."

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For a long time Kendra offered up the memory of this evening to herself as evidence that things were still okay at that point. But after a while, the evening became evidence of something else altogether. Every occupation her father facetiously proposed involved travel. Each one would have taken him away from her and Mary Jo and their mother, just as surely as the one he finally hit on.

When he first took the job selling dictionaries, he came home every weekend; he phoned at least every couple of days. Later he began coming home every other weekend, and the phone calls became infrequent. Later still, to save money—toward buying a house in Jackson, he said, a place where they could all live together—he suggested they have their own phone removed. Their mother reluctantly agreed.

As for their mother, Mary Jo says she's like Nixon: the question is what did she know and when did she know it. But in Kendra's mind, the question is not what their mother knew and when she knew it. The question is how she knew it. Kendra sees her knowing as a dark heavy thing, a coldness that crept into her and made it hard for her to move.

At a certain point in her recollections, her mother begins to move in slow motion. Lying in bed beside Mary Jo or sitting on the floor in front of the space heater, she hears her mother's footsteps in the kitchen. The interval between one footstep and the next starts to seem absurdly long, and as she waits to hear it, she sees her mother's ragged pink slipper descending slowly, almost as if a parachute were attached to it, asserting drag. Meals take longer for their mother to fix; dinner, which at that time they call supper, begins to come from cans and boxes. Washing dishes, she sometimes pauses, a saucer in one hand, a soapy sponge in the other, to stare out the window at the field across the road.

One day she walks out onto the porch while they're doing their homework; they've just returned from school. A storm is banking up in the west. "A cloud's coming," she says. It moves in fast, sudden gusts of wind rake the pecan trees, brown-hulled nuts shower down, and then the rain itself. It's heavy rain, Mississippi rain, silver sheets that ripple like stage curtains.

The storm only lasts ten or twelve minutes. But there's a lot of thunder and lightning, and the whole time it's going on, their mother is out there on the porch. Kendra believes they must have

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worried about her, that they would have begged her to come in unless they somehow knew that she needed, right then, to be alone with the wind.

Afterwards, she walks in and says, "Let's go get in the truck."

They're using the truck because their father has the car. The truck is an ancient black International pickup with running boards like you see on the cars in gangster movies. Starting it can be a problem, but today it cranks right up.

Kendra's next to the door, Mary Jo is in the middle. Their mother doesn't say where they're going; in fact, the way Kendra remembers it, she doesn't say a word for the entire trip, and for once Mary Jo can't contradict her because Mary Jo says the trip didn't take place. Or to be more precise, Mary Jo says the trip took place later—at least three months later, possibly more—and she says it took place on a Saturday morning.

In Kendra's version it's late afternoon, probably the third or fourth week in October. From the distance of forty years and two thousand miles, everything appears in soft focus. The barn beside the highway lacks line and definition; a red farmhouse, set farther back, bleeds color. There's cotton in the field, there must be. White splotches appear in the picture.

Their mother parks the truck in a gravel lot before a small brick building at the edge of a field. Other pickup trucks are parked here too. A couple of men wearing muddy overalls are standing in front of the building, gesturing at the sky, then at the ground. They must be farmers. They were probably out in the fields picking cotton when the storm hit.

Their mother gets out of the truck. The men stop talking. They stare at her. She walks past them, into the store.

Because that's what it is: a store. On the window, white letters with red borders spell LIQUOR. Their mother is inside for a couple of minutes. While she's in there, the two muddy farmers look at the pickup truck, at Kendra and her sister, and then they shake their heads.

Their mother comes out toting a brown paper sack. She gets into the truck and starts it, and they turn around and go back.

For a long time, Kendra believes that her mother has driven some distance away from home in order to avoid being seen by anyone who knows her. This, in an odd way, offers comfort, further proof of propriety.

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Then, years later, while she's prowling around the library at UCLA, her mind half numb from trying to focus on the notecards she's been filling out for five or six hours, the title on the spine of a book catches her attention. *Fevers, Floods and Faith.* It's a history of Sunflower County, Mississippi. Sitting down and flipping through it, she learns that the county she grew up in was dry until 1968.

What her mother must have done that day was drive across the line into Leflore County. What her mother must have done, even then, when she was still going to church on Sunday and saying amen and other women still spoke to her in the aisle at Piggly Wiggly, was buy her booze the first place she could find it.

There are certain things, Kendra understands, that perceptive men figure out about her.

A perceptive man learns that when he's with her, he's the only other person in her world; when he's not with her, he can expect to feel as if for her he no longer exists. Phone calls will go unanswered; messages will seldom be returned. From time to time, she will simply disappear.

Many of the men she's known have been married. A few have tried to leave their wives and children for her. But perceptive men know or figure out that you can't leave your wife and children for Kendra.

Children—she knows this from experience—feel it when you pose a threat to them. They feel the threatening fact of your existence, even if they never know your face. They feel you in the faraway stares on the faces of those who matter most.

Children—especially the children of the men she knows—love Kendra, to Kendra they come running. They perch on her knee while she whispers to them. Tiny fingers find their way into her hair, little arms wrap themselves around her neck.

People shake their heads. It's a pity, they say, that she never had a few kids of her own.

The Christmas tree looks threadbare. Her father notices it the moment he walks in.

He's been gone again, this time for almost a month. It's a few days till Christmas. They picked the tree up the other day with

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their mother. It's a cedar tree, and except for a single string of lights and four or five glass ornaments, there's nothing on it.

There's not much under it either. Two packages for Kendra and two for Mary Jo and one for their father. They're not expecting a lot this year, they know times are hard.

"This tree's almost naked," their father says. "This tree belongs in *Playboy*."

Not too long ago their mother would have come back with something snappy like *It's too skinny for that.* Now she says nothing. She's sitting on the couch, drinking hot tea from a white cup that has a drawing of a magnolia on it. The tea smells funny. Kendra knows it does because sometimes her mother leaves that cup standing around, and more than once Kendra has picked it up and sniffed it.

"Who wants to go with me to town," their father says, "and get some decent duds for this tree?"

Her voice is the only one that says *I do.*

It's raining again, and the rain is cold, so cold that her father says he bets it will turn into snow or, at the very least, sleet. Sleet is something she knows about then, though the word will soon disappear from her active vocabulary. Words like *surf* and *freeway* will replace *sleet* and *defoliant.* Her surroundings are about to change, the blacktop road she's riding on will at times seem so far away that her distance from it can't be measured by any known means; at other times she'll travel down it again, through cold rain turning into something hard and icy, through darkness that seals her up forever into these moments with her father.

The wipers squeak back and forth across the windshield. Her father keeps his eyes on the road. He's a careful driver. Tonight they travel slow.

"Doing okay in school?" he says.

"I'm doing fine."

"You'll always do fine."

The way she will remember that line, the first word is italicized.

"You're an awfully smart little girl," he says. He reaches across the seat and takes her hand in one of his and gives it a squeeze.

"Mary Jo's smart too," she says.

"She sure is. But she's smart in a different way."

"What way am I smart?"

"You're smart in ways that may not always make life easy."

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The lack of syntactical clarity in this statement is not, she knows now, what causes him to pause for several minutes. When he speaks again, he says, "I mean, let's think about explorers. You know what explorers are?"

"People that discover something?"

"Yeah. Sometimes what they discover causes them trouble. You probably haven't heard of a guy named Copernicus, but he's the fellow who pretty much proved once and for all that the sun was at the center of the solar system. And he got into all sorts of trouble for saying so. People thought he was way out of line."

Her father says he thinks she might be an explorer. He says she may not ever discover new continents or galaxies, but she may discover other things that people might not want to know. She may not even want to know them herself, he says.

Through the rain, the lights of town, slanted and distorted, begin to appear. Where the road crosses the highway, there's a red light. They stop there, waiting for the light to turn green.

When the light turns green, they'll turn into the highway. They'll drive along the highway for a mile or so, take a right onto Sunflower Avenue, and head for downtown. Once there, they'll park on the street, in front of Piggly Wiggly, right beneath one of several big candy canes that dangle over the sidewalks at Christmas. They'll get out of the car and hurry through the rain to Woolworth's, and they'll rush inside and buy two strings of Christmas lights, a package of tinsel, and a box of ornaments made of colored glass.

But before all of that happens, while they're still waiting for the light to change, her father has one more thing to say.

One day, he says, in the not-too-distant future, he'll be going away. He might be gone a lot longer this time, so long that Kendra's mother and Mary Jo may think he's never coming home.

"But you won't think that, will you?" he says.

She recalls shaking her head.

"That's good," he says. "Just remember that you're an explorer. It just so happens that I am too. We'll find each other again, you and me, and then we'll find your mother and Mary Jo. Just as sure as that red light up there's about to turn green."

The light changes colors, and then they're gone.

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And then, several days later, on December 27, a date she and Mary Jo never disagree about, she wakes to find him gone.

A couple of hours later, around ten o'clock, he's really gone.

The Mississippi Highway Patrol car that she remembers is a black-and-white creation. Mary Jo says it was blue, that the car Kendra has in mind is the one Barney Fife drove on "The Andy Griffith Show." Kendra doesn't say so, but she knows it isn't a car from TV she has in mind. The truth is that she sees the entire scene in black-and-white, so there's no other color the Highway Patrol car could be.

The state trooper climbs the front steps. He's wearing a raincoat—black in the picture—and the raincoat is wet and shiny. Her mother carries her cup to the front door. She's been drinking from it all morning, the funny-smelling tea.

She opens the door, and there the trooper stands, a wide-brimmed hat, wet also, in his hands. He asks if she's Mrs. Nelson.

They're behind her now, Kendra and her sister; Mary Jo clings to her mother's bathrobe. Kendra keeps her hands to herself. She touches no one, no one touches her.

For the longest time their mother fails to answer. Later, it will occur to Kendra that she's had to consider the question, whether or not she's really Mrs. Nelson; it's almost as if in this moment she's become aware that her identity has changed.

She nods, but the nod is something less than a yes.

The trooper says he's sorry to bear bad news. The rest passes in a grey blur, one fact colliding with another: how 49 South has a glaze on it this morning, the trouble some motorists have had with visibility; the way her father lost control of his car, how he slid out of his lane and into the other, what happened when he hit the bridge abutment. How very sorry the state trooper is, how he wishes he had better news to bring her and her beautiful girls.

"They look so much like you," he says, this big awkward man who is the first among many men to express sympathy for their mother, to be moved by the sight of this lonely woman, these fatherless girls.

In the next five years she lives in six states, in rented houses, run-down apartments and once, on the outskirts of Freeport, Texas, in a motel. Her mother moves westward, drawn on by men who always seem to be headed in that direction. The last one

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leaves them within sight of the Pacific, in a walk-up apartment in Long Beach.

Her mother quits going to church. She works from time to time as a waitress, at other times as a desk clerk at motels. She loses one job after another, very often for drinking at work. She's happiest when there are men around to take care of her. A lot of them do but only for a while.

When she looks back on this period in her life, Kendra remembers walking home from school—walking from many different schools, to many different homes. She remembers some of the sights she saw along the way: the barbecue stand beside the street in Freeport, where the woman who did the cooking sometimes motioned her in and offered her french fries and a running commentary on the lives of the characters in "General Hospital" and "The Edge of Night"; a junkyard in Phoenix, the tiger-striped cat who prowled there, crawling among the wrecks in search of mice; a drive-in in Banning, California, where teenagers parked for hours, rock and roll blaring from their radios, the guys trading innocent threats, the girls jumping out of one car and into another, giggling, their ponytails flying.

But mostly what she remembers from that period are the walks she took with her father. She met him almost daily, he had never been more real. He turned up in every city she lived in. She told him of the various discoveries she had made since that morning when Highway 49 glazed and he strayed from the southbound lane. She told him that by Christmas of the first year in Jamestown, only 32 of more than 100 colonists were still alive; they'd built their village in a swamp, she said, and mosquitoes had bitten them and made them sick. She told him that Mozart had been a prodigy, that he'd composed music on the piano when he was only five years old.

The highest mountain in the world is in Asia, she said, the world's longest river is in Africa. The greatest lake is the Caspian Sea. The first chief justice of the Supreme Court was John Jay.

You weren't really selling those books, she said. You hadn't been selling them for almost three months. She told him how their mother loaded them both into the truck, how the truck quit in Belzoni and their mother got a garage mechanic to make it run by promising to come back on the weekend for a date. She told him Mary Jo looked the other way when they came to the bridge

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over the Yazoo River, but she and her mother saw the blue paint on the abutment, and her mother sobbed silently all the way to Jackson. She told him about waiting outside in the truck, while her mother carried his black satchel that contained the dictionaries into a little office within sight of the Capitol Dome, how she came out moments later, her face white and dead. *You can't trust a man,* she said, this woman who would spend the rest of her life entrusting herself and her girls to one man and then another.

She told her father she believed the boarding house existed but only in his mind. She told him she believed that somewhere there was someone else, someone besides her mother, and that this was whom he had gone to. She didn't know why he hadn't made it the last time.

Her father never answered, he never said a word, but answers were not what she sought. She poured herself out to him. In return he gave her his attention, and right then that was enough.

The year she turns fifty, she goes back.

It's January, and she's on winter break from the university where she teaches. She and Mary Jo fly into Memphis, rent a car and drive down into the Delta.

They spend the night at a Comfort Inn in Indianola, the town where they grew up. In the morning they eat breakfast at McDonald's. They drive through the downtown area—the Piggly Wiggly's still there—then they cross the highway on a blacktop road that heads north.

It's a cold grey day; a brisk wind is blowing. In the fields, dead cotton stalks bend double. She remembers the way those stalks whistle when the wind blows hard. It's a sound she hasn't thought about in years.

These days a lot of the land is given over to catfish ponds. They see them now, muddy rectangles that spread out on both sides of the road, breaking the countryside up into watery sections.

There's a pond across the road from their house, where the empty field used to be. The field, as it turns out, was on the north side of the house, not the west or the south.

"We were both wrong," Mary Jo says.

Somebody has turned the front porch into a room and added on another structure to serve as a porch. There are trees all

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around, more than either of them remembers, pine trees as well as pecan. A Ford pickup is parked in the driveway.

A swing set stands in the yard. Near the front porch there's a pink tricycle; a white basket is attached to the handlebars, red streamers dangle from the grips.

Looking at the house, Kendra wonders if the space heater remains in the bedroom where the little girl who owns that tricycle sleeps. She wonders if the child ever sits before the heater like she did.

Once again, for a few seconds, she lets herself remember the way the radiants split the fire into diamond-shaped bits. When she was two or three, each of those pieces seemed separate and distinct; she thought she was looking at many different flames, not a single burning thing.

Back then the world was new, and she believed, as children do, that lines possess the power to divide.

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DANA GIOIA

The Voyeur

. . . and watching her undress across the room,
Oblivious of him, watching as her slip
Falls soundlessly and disappears in shadow
And the dim lamplight makes her curving frame
Seem momentarily both luminous
And insubstantial—like the shadow of a cloud
Drifting across a hillside far away.

Watching her turn away, this slender ghost,
This silhouette of mystery, his wife,
Walk naked to her bath, the room around her
So long familiar that it is, like him,
Invisible to her, he sees himself
Suspended in the branches by the window,
Entering this strange bedroom with his eyes.

Seen from the darkness, even the walls glow—
A golden woman lights the amber air.
He looks and aches not only for her touch
But for the secret that her presence brings.
She is the moonlight, sovereign and detached.
He is a shadow flattened on the pavement,
The one whom locks and windows keep away.

But what he watches here is his own life.
He is the missing man, the loyal husband,
Sitting in the room he craves to enter,
Surrounded by the flesh and furniture of home.
He notices a cat curled on the bed.
He hears a woman singing in the shower.
The branches shake their dry leaves like alarms.

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Metamorphosis

There were a few, the old ones promised us,
Who could escape. A few who once, when trapped
At the extreme of violence, reached out
Beyond the rapist's hand or sudden blade.

Their fingers branched and blossomed. Or they leapt
Unthinking from the heavy earth to fly
With voices—ever softer—that became
The admonitions of the nightingale.
They proved, like cornered Daphne twisting free,
There were a few whom even the great gods
Could not destroy.

And you, my gentle ghost,
Did you break free before the cold hand clutched?
Did you escape into the lucid air
Or burrow secretly among the dark
Expectant roots, to rise again with them
As the unknown companion of our spring?

I'll never know, my changeling, where you've gone,
And so I'll praise you—flower, bird, and tree—
My nightingale awake among the thorns,
My laurel tree that marks a god's defeat,
My blossom bending on the water's edge,
Forever lost within your inward gaze.

For Sale

Your first home, your handyman's special!
Leading us through the dark wall-papered rooms,
you joked about the debt

confident that new fixtures, another coat of paint

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would heal the ceiling cracks
and make the scuffed floors gleam.

Someone else's old bouquets
festooned the bedroom walls—bright
pink wallpaper rusting into brown.

Windmill upon windmill
floated in the Delft-blue bathroom.
The paper curled at the corners.

Getting our coats, we saw the paint cans
unopened in the closet, your ladder
folded flat against the wall.

Standing on the porch, you waved
goodbye, goodbye, as if we were the ones
going on a journey.

Failure

As with any child, you find your own more beautiful—
eager to nurse it along, watch over it,
and taking special pride as each day
it grows more gorgeously like you.

Why not consider it a sort of accomplishment?
Failure doesn't happen by itself. It takes time,
effort, and a certain undeniable gift.
Satisfaction comes from recognizing what you do best.

Most of what happens is never intended,
but deep inside you know you planned this—
not a slip or a fumble but a total rout.
You only fail at what you really aim for.

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The Litany

This is a litany of lost things,
a canon of possessions dispossessed,
a photograph, an old address, a key.
It is a list of words to memorize
or to forget—of *amo, amas, amat,*
the conjugations of a dead tongue
in which the final sentence has been spoken.

This is the liturgy of rain,
falling on mountain, field, and ocean—
indifferent, anonymous, complete—
of water infinitesimally slow,
sifting through rock, pooling in darkness,
gathering in springs, then rising without our agency,
only to dissolve in mist or cloud or dew.

This is a prayer to unbelief,
to candles guttering and darkness undivided,
to incense drifting into emptiness.
It is the smile of a stone madonna
and the solar fury of the consecrated wine,
a benediction on the death of a young god,
brave and beautiful, rotting on a tree.

This is a litany to earth and ashes,
to the dust of roads and vacant rooms,
to the fine silt circling in a shaft of sun,
settling indifferently on books and beds.
This is a prayer to praise what we become,
"Dust thou art, to dust thou shalt return."
Savor its taste—the bitterness of earth and ashes.

This is a prayer, inchoate and unfinished,
for you, my love, my loss, my lesion,
a rosary of words to count out time's
illusions, all the minutes, hours, days
the calendar compounds as if the past

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existed somewhat—like an inheritance
still waiting to be claimed.

Until at last it is our litany, *mon vieux*,
my reader, my voyeur, as if the mist
steaming from the gorge, this pure paradox,
the shattered river rising as it falls—
splintering the light, swirling it skyward,
neither transparent nor opaque but luminous,
even as it vanishes—were not our life.

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DANA ANDREW JENNINGS

Ten Shovelfuls of Dirt

I. Kingston, N.H., 1962

Dad's wedged under the car, making love to it—"Turn, you sweet bitch. Turn."—and I'm flat on my sweaty stomach, handing him wrenches and screwdrivers and 'Gansett beers ("Howdy, neighbor, have a 'Gansett"). Footsteps crunch and crackle in the rocky dooryard. A cheap cowboy boot nudges Dad's foot. Uncle Lloyd.

Dad worms from out the car and stares up at his younger brother, who doesn't even say hello. Uncle Lloyd looks through me, then says to Dad: "I think Ma's fucking the nigger."

This is Kingston, N.H., 1962, but it may as well be Alabama. My relations are proud of themselves when they remember to say "colored." When us kids play "eenie-meenie-miney-moe," we aren't catching tigers by the toe. And my Great-Aunt Helen is always bragging about her cast-iron stove that's "shinier than a nigger's eyeball."

Uncle Lloyd's all ready for Saturday night: black jeans, black cowboy shirt with fancy lightning stitches on the pockets, hair piled slick and high—a Brylcreem haystack—and a Pabst Blue-Ribbon beer in his hand. He toes at the dirt.

"What're we going to do?" Uncle Lloyd says.

I know my uncle's talking about Maury Thompson, a black man who worked with my grandfather, Bub Jennings (Bub deserted his family on Christmas Day 1953; my father was thirteen), at a sawmill over to East Kingston. A black man who used to baby-sit my father and his brothers. A black man who, Dad says, is one of the hardest workers he's ever known.

But Uncle Lloyd's suspicion about his mother is eating at him the way, years later, the whiskey will eat at him. To Uncle Lloyd, just the idea of his mother and Maury is another shovel of dirt thrown in his face.

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We *are* dirt. Not total dirt. Not beaten-down dirt. Not Cedar Swamp dirt. But dirt—and he can't stand it.

The question—"What're we going to do?"—still stains Uncle Lloyd's face when Dad captures his brother's shifty rat eyes and says, "Nothin'," the threat full and honest in the dropped "g."

II. Fall 1957

If my parents, Dana Floyd Jennings and Florence May Jennings, had gone to high school, they would have started their junior year in the fall of 1957. Instead, that was when the two seventeen-year-olds married (my father owed my mother 18 bucks), on September 27, 1957.

Eight days later, I was born.

III. King of the Dump

My great-grandfather, Ora Porter George, wearing rubber waders, shuffles through the rubble of the town dump. Bitter gray smoke and ash swirl around him and soot-feathered gulls wheel overhead cawing and screeching; Grandpa's stiff movements are punctuated by the pop of exploding bottles.

I wait as he wades, hard-eyeing the dump's lumpy contours, trying to pluck a discarded gem from the mess of brown paper shopping bags, stumps and dirty orange flames.

Grandpa Ora revealed to me the possibilities of a dump, taught me that among the sizzling mounds of garbage and scuttling rats lurked little treasures, small pleasures: birdhouses, comic books, copper wire, tires, returnable tonic bottles, bicycle skeletons, Christmas tree ornaments—even poetry. I still own a Tennyson salvaged long ago from Kingston's town dump.

People stare, look at us the way you would look at the ripe carcass of a dead woodchuck sprawled and splattered in the middle of Route 125. They whisper, nudge each other. But I look straight ahead, watching Grandpa pick his way.

Strangers' talk means less than the squawk of the gulls.

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IV. King of the Road

Every morning, George Kelly rose out of Cedar Swamp, where he lived with "that nigger woman" as my great-aunts used to whisper, and ghosted through Kingston, a khaki wraith stuffing his tote sack with pine cones and cans, road kill and tonic bottles. There was never a cigarette butt or a cigar stub he wasn't grateful for.

One hot August afternoon, one of those red-faced and breathless afternoons when it seems the summer's never going to end, my sister sees George Kelly haunting down our road, a cloud of dust boiling behind him.

"George Kelly's coming!" she yells. "George Kelly's coming."

Sis and I run into the barn and hide, shiver in the dark cool.

An oak tree stands across the road from our place, one of those great-grandfather oaks that draws lightning, stray cats and drunk drivers. When George Kelly gets to that tree, he stops. He looks up the road and he looks down the road, his head swiveling like an owl's.

Satisfied that no one's around, George Kelly pulls down his pants, slaps his hands onto his knobby hips, arches his back and, ballicky bareass, proceeds to piss on our tree.

V. When You're Dirt

When you're dirt, you:

shoot rats at the town dump for sport; have an outhouse, no central heat and cold running water that freezes in the pipes come winter; buy a gallon of milk and a loaf of bread on the cuff in the middle of the week, when the money runs out; play race car in a stove-up '63 Ford Falcon decomposing in the dooryard; eat snapping turtle, squirrel and woodchuck, and are grateful for it; wear flood pants with the knees patched and repatched and use a safety pin to keep those pants fastened; snack on sugar sandwiches and use tomato soup instead of tomato sauce on your macaroni; race a 1937 Pontiac coupe, No. 75, down to the Pines Speedway every Saturday night; don't just listen to country music, but live country music; go sledding on the black hood of a dead Ford; have uncles named Floyd and Lloyd who play guitar . . . but

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not very well; feel work in your stiff fingers, even, maybe especially, first thing in the morning; play horseshoes and drink cheap beer; eat Spam boiled dinners; lug water from the well and chop wood; are missing fingers.

And when you're dirt, when you're a peasant, you end up knowing a lot about dirt: You know how to dig a cellar by hand; how to plant a good vegetable garden; know where to find the best nightcrawlers for fish bait (when you're dirt, you eat bony pickerel and swampy horn pout); how much a truckload of fill costs. I learned to play tennis on a homemade dirt court.

And when you're dirt, your mother's mother, a gristly vulture named Lilla, stares at you like she's hungry and keeps saying: "Us kids never had nothing'. Us kids never had nothin'."

VI. "I Got Three Men . . ."

Dad and I are digging a cellar for my Great-Aunt Helen. She's paying me a buck an hour; Dad's getting paid in beer.

We're being helped by Uncle Allen—who hasn't slept with Auntie Helen since the first year of their marriage, when she miscarried the baby that forced them to get married in the first place—and Uncle Irving, who isn't my uncle but has lived with Allen and Helen since I can remember and who's my Uncle Allen's best friend and who has slept with Auntie Helen for years. Uncle Allen, who once put his cold bony hand down the back of my sister's pants, is called Zeke. Uncle Irving, who laughs like a cat that's just been mauled by a German shepherd, is called Teddy Bear.

We're being watched by Albert, who has recently run away from his wife, Blanche, and who is screwing both Auntie Helen and her sister, Lilla, my mother's mother. Sometimes, I think Dad and I are digging this cellar for the entertainment value.

I go into the house to get a drink of water. Auntie Helen sits at the kitchen table: she has pink rollers in her hair; she's slightly cross-eyed; she has a triple-chin studded with barbwire whiskers and breasts the size of woodchucks.

"You know, Andy," she says to me. "I got three men living in this g.d. house. And if you put'em all together, you ain't got one man."

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VII. "May We Use Your Phone?"

I came of age among Depression-haunted people who called lunch dinner, nailed shut their front doors, and who considered a telephone a luxury. It was something other people had and, besides, phones only let other people stick their nose in your business, anyway, and shouldn't Uncle Billy get electric on his place before someone puts on airs and goes and gets a telephone? (Sometimes, even though I was born in 1957, I felt like I was growing up in the 1930s.) We didn't even have toy phones. No sense in getting our hopes up.

So, when my family needed to make a phone call when I was a kid, I was the one—being the oldest—who had to take the long trudge to the neighbors, knock on the screen door, and mumble, "May we use your phone?" to my sneakers.

Seems to me that those musty, cat-infested houses (considerate beggars, we rotated the inconvenience) were always ruled by squat, sweating grammies whose hands were white with flour. Their phones stank of sour milk and fried food and were situated under curling, amber fly strips stippled with tiny crunchy carcasses.

Gut clenching, mouth cottoning, I stand there gawking at the phone till I get asked, "Want me to dial?" I hand over the damp paper scrap, the number scrawled in smudged pencil. When I finish, I flee—the screen door whanging shut behind me—sprinting home, free, my family duty fulfilled.

Until the next time.

VIII. My Cousin Marie

My cousin Marie, three years older than I am, is actually my mother's first cousin. One of those change-of-life deals.

When I arrived in second grade at Daniel J. Bakie Elementary School, my cousin Marie, three years older than I am, remember, was still there.

When we had a substitute teacher, my cousin Marie always told her that it was her birthday so she could wear a construction-paper crown all day.

My cousin Marie gave my sister lice, my sister had to get her hair cut short as a boy's and she has hated her cousin Marie ever since.

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My cousin Marie has two sons. Their names are Elvis Presley Perez and Ricky Nelson Perez.

IX. Fourth Grade

This is what I remember of fourth grade: My mother sits at the kitchen table sipping Lipton tea sweetened with Pet condensed milk. She stares out the window—crying, as far as I can tell, for no good reason.

I missed 73 out of 180 school days that year. I can still see the notes Mom wrote to my teacher, Miss Gove, in her cramped, tortured hand: "I kept Andy home from school to help me out around the house because I didn't feel good." Miss Gove, my mother's age, drove a lipstick-red Corvette convertible.

I realize now that my mother broke down that year, wore the caul of depression. At twenty-seven years old, she had already been married ten years. Money was tight; my father drank too much. She spent her days in rural solitary, doing chores, caring for three children. She needed me there to keep her company.

We didn't talk much. We didn't touch; people in my family never touched. Mornings we sat together and watched "Concentration" and reruns of "The Beverly Hillbillies." I read a lot: *Jungle Book, Call of the Wild, Tarzan of the Apes.*

I was there just in case, a safety net. I guided my mother through the silence of her days, the spontaneous tears and sighs. And I watched my father, inarticulate and afraid, smolder. My parents needed me that year I was nine. I was a bridge, no matter how narrow and rickety, a suture.

And not one word from school. I was the phantom of the fourth grade, and no one had a thing to say. Dirt's invisible.

Miss Gove wrote one comment on my report card the whole year: "Dana has missed a great deal of math instruction and this is reflected in his work."

X. Grammy and Maury

All Grammy Jennings ever wanted was a beer in one hand, and a man in the other. She ruled ramshackle husks bulldozed under

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years ago, and loved hard-drinking, cigarette-sucking men who spent their lives like firecrackers:

Frank, whom my father had to fight most weekends to keep him from beating up my grandmother; Reggie, who had fleas in his beard and could bray like a jackass; Phillippi, a Filipino Dad threw out of the house the day of J.F.K.'s funeral because he laughed about Kennedy's assassination; Joe, who let me beat him in checkers; Lou, who spent his days making models of helicopters and aircraft carriers out of cardboard and toilet-paper tubes; Harry, an Indian from Texas who had a collection of 78 r.p.m. dirty blues records.

Laura Jennings outlived them all, every goddamned one of them and more . . . this orphan born in Franklin, N.H., on July 23, 1910 . . . this fourteen-year-old runaway . . . this TB patient . . . this alcoholic . . . my grandmother. I wish I'd known her better. But her stairs were steep and dark, and she wasn't one to hold a child's hand.

When Maury Thompson, "Ma's nigger" Uncle Lloyd would sneer every time, died in the 1970s, Grammy gave him her plot next to Harry Cain, "Ma's fucking Indian" (Uncle Lloyd again) and the man she had loved best, in Kingston's Pine Grove Cemetery. She couldn't bear the thought of a pauper's grave for Maury. (Dad gave Maury his best epitaph: "He was just a hot shit who liked to drink.")

And when Grammy died in 1993, her tough, old body was donated to Harvard Medical School and, later, she was cremated.

She didn't mind the going back to ashes and dust, but she'd be damned if she was going to let them dig a hole in the ground and let them throw dirt on her body.

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LAURENCE LIEBERMAN

Embracing the Sisserou Parrot

1

Here, a light mist of rain
seems perpetual. Blazing sun and no cloud wisps in sight . . .
Even the sprawling town of Roseau,
though it cuts a wider swathe
through dense woods
than any other hamlet, is still engulfed in rain forest:
the whole country
a floral garden bathed in constant swifts & runnels.
Only a wee niche
here, a niche there, cut into nature—the Great Sea
of flowers abides, petals & blooms
nodding from every alcove

or recess . . . *This city could be*
a fragile accident, whose
modest towers
can't hold lush vineworld
at bay . . . Today, I'm so inured

to the steady fine shower
of sun-spray, I'm caught by surprise when rain barrels down
in gleamy sheets: I huddle in a low
archway, muttering to myself
about the weird mix
of the elements: torrents and furious downpour paced
by fullest sun
blaze. No wonder, then, flower blossoms seem to spring up
from the very dust
of pavements: they don't need a crack to root down into—
like air plants, they may drink, directly,
from the laziest breezes . . .

Amazed, I keep up a self squabble:
hot rain & cold sun, O how
do they mix
& match? I'm trying to mumble
my way toward sly trope to take in

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this potpourri of the sky's
droppings, when a gay whimsical voice overhead (true genie
popped out of a bottle) filters down
three or four stories to me:
it means the Devil
be taking a bride. And I shamble indoors the next moment,
while four hefty
gongs are struck with steel clapper in the bell tower
above my skull:
so near, each peal throbs my spine as if a tuning fork
running down my lower back vibrates
my whole chain of vertebrae. . . .

2

Bowed over, I peer
into the dim-lit Methodist Church and take cautious
steps down the aisle.
I catch a pattering of rapid-fire
footfalls linked in winding descent from the tower
three stories above—
so airy and light-footed, they may signal a child's
approach; but no, it's a smallish
graceful black man,
his eyes afire with his lips' broad smile, one hand
outstretched in greeting.
Forehead sweating profusely, he's almost
two heads shorter *than me,* but no dwarf or midget,
just small and fitly

proportioned. I see
beads of sweat roll down his brow like heavy balls
of mercury, and fall—
one by one—to his shirt lapels.
It was I who spoke before. You couldn't see me
in the window shaft
above. The Devil is getting married: that's what
we say when strong rain & bright sun
clash. It happens
every day, here in Roseau. I thank him, Julian
Walsh his name. Lived
in Chicago for six-and-a-half years,
until masonry work ran out (no one alive mortars
brick upon cool brick

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any faster than he,
or neater); layoff gave him time to tour The States,
then homeward bound
to his birthplace: Dominica,
his secure post saved in a local construction firm
pending his anytime
return. Now he's back in his element, will stay put,
his first home his best love still,
at thirty-eight. He loves
the wide spectrum of flowers in every shade or color
you can possibly dream up—
he may never wish to leave home again.
God's Rainbow came down to earth in Roseau, says he,
and here it nestled

into the countless
roots and petals of flowering bush, shrub, orchard.
You can't walk far,
anyplace in this carnation-choked
land, without stumbling into the medley of blooms.
That said, he leads me
down a narrow aisle between pews to the altar stand,
a great tall flower-vase centerpiece
displayed thereon . . .
Cheery Anabelle, her arms cradling two thick bouquets
of fresh-picked long-stemmed
blooms, enters the chapel by a side door.
She flicks a perfect white lily to Julian, coquettishly,
and sorts her two choice

clusters of blossom
in a succession of wall-hanging baskets. Delicately,
she weaves a few stems
into wreaths around wickerwork rims,
then stacks the remainder in surprise eye-fetching
arrangements, no two
near alike: her knack for sorting by color and shape
a true art. She saves the prize longstems
to add to the altar
centerpiece, removing a handful of blooms which show
first signs of wilting
or loss of freshness . . . Now Julian
offers me a priapic golden heliconia, bananaesque
in the arc and texture

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of its half-opened
bud, most petals still hugging the sheath. I motion
to refuse the gift,
shyly, but he insists that I pack
this one favorite *wild iris* in the journal book
I carry. It, too, shall wilt
and die, so he'll have to discard it on the flower-
dump mulch pile back in the churchyard.
Far better it should
adorn my note-taking in these first euphoric hours
of my return visit . . .
As Anabelle ducks out the side door,
she nods her approval of lily stem tucked in my cover,
& dips into a curtsy.

3

Volunteers
we are, says Julian:
Anabelle comes every third day
to replace all withering flowers with pristine
newborns, then to improvise
fresh patterns
of display. She tends
her baskets, punctually, for a month
or two—then rotates
the task to some other grateful parishioners
of *The Faith*. Julian, who fulfills
both roles of sexton
& janitor

(unpaid as well), will devote each Saturday
all year to the job.
He so proudly takes to the duties.
And greeting pilgrim
visitors
from abroad he finds
to be his gladdest boon. All others,
before him, put in one month,
no more—he the first
to effloresce
into the long-term commitment.
O I'm a hanger-on,
he whispers, playing down his outsize gift

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of Spirit.
A diligence . . . Now he's
teaching me the names & shapes
of flowers, the altarpiece an unequal balance
among three varieties:
pink lilies
mostly; a very few
white lilies, the latter soonest turning
drab gray and frayed
around the edges, the petals wilting quickest;
and those dark yellows he dubs
Wild Iris . . . He commands
my eye

utterly, while he leads my glance, wordlessly,
with his finger wand
from each basket in the equidistant
chain of hanging gardens
to a lovely
sequence of stained-glass
windows, a little above and behind
the neatly suspended bouquets.
Each corresponding window
seems mated
to the flower clusters below.
Proud, proud of these
he is! The windows are less than a year old . . .

4

A free gift to the Church,
he says, from those *rough-and-tumble* American Missionaries,
three elderly ladies from Missouri
who vacation here for some weeks
each summer's end.
And what a marvel it was to find them at daybreak,
if not before,
taking hammer and saw, chisel and wrench, to install
the frail windows
in those uncertain frames where cheap dimestore glass
had been poked out, wicked glass slivers
needling their fingertips

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and wrists, despite the canvas work
gloves Julian entrusted to them.
Insisted—over
mild protests—that they wore,
as they planed rough edges and pried

old cracked flaky shards
from the corners and pits in yesteryear's window caulking.
He worked alongside, though quicker
they were, and more attentive
to perplexing details
of the hinges; women who devoted more time, he surmised,
to crochetwork
or knitting than carpentry. He'd kept the first aid kits
poised at the ready,
but they hated to stop for a *mere scratch.* The spurt
of a true puncture wound shook one lass
to a halt—briefest at that.

Ageless in their spunk, the Missouri
gals installed twelve windows
below: six
on either side of the main hall
and Chapel, plus four door-size high

swinging windows, ranked
at equal intervals of ascent in the tower. Those windows
in the belfry are *the Cat's Pajamas,*
he sighs. No one has ever before
built any to compare.
Those below, as I can plainly see, mirror the colors
and petal shapes
of flowers heaped & sorted in the baskets underneath;
while those above
portray true replicas of Dominica's national birds,
the Jaco & Sisserou Parrots emblazoned
on the small nation's flag.

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5

His eyes open wide, ever wider, as he burbles,
the art work of prisoners
tagged for life sentences—a grim few
on Death Row staring down
EARLY DATES
for lethal injections . . .
The rugged all-weather garbage haulers,
house movers and longshoremen
(who loaded & unloaded
Mississippi
barges, the dingiest muscle-
cramping travails)
in their pre-jail stints: so grateful were they

for solace
given them by those Church
Women who visited their cells, weekly,
and steeled them to face their *un*futures bravely,
they volunteered (as does Julian
in his way)
to fiddle with jigsaw
glass puzzle pieces, and thereby to groove
their own immortal
Soul Life in Church Windows. They cracked sheets
of colored glass into nuggets—
lopsided triangles,
rhomboids,

semicircles—whatever colors & oddly concocted
shapes might seem to match up
with designs of flower bouquets in photos
that Julian sent them
highlighting
a recent flower arranger's
caprice. A few men set out to slavishly
imitate petals with glass parts.
Soulful others devised
fetching twists
that caught the feel of the photos
but took account
of glass shine's own demands. Glass medium stole

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their hearts!
The idea of birdtail feathers
or flower blooms prompted the impulse,
but a mosaic of glass shards made its own claims.
They struggled to appease
both muses,
equally. This I can see,
today, as I compare their window glass
art with the floral
counterparts. No one urged them to be *artists*,
or as imagination dictates,
to create freely—
but rather,

to make fit emblems with colored glass to stand
side-by-side with fresh bouquets.
They gave and gave, unstinting, to glass
flower parts, glass bird beaks,
bird crowns.
They cracked glass sheets, drew
lines with glass knives, and broke zigzags
along the exact seams, precise
and intricate. Mistakes
grew rare.
The windows, cut minutely to scale
for the Church's
wall grooves, were shipped whole from Missouri

State Prison
to Roseau Methodist Church,
Certified and Insured, in museum-sturdy
fine art crates. Julian would love to meet them
all, some lucky day before
they die, or
before *we any of us die*,
to thank them for the gift of their last
months alive. He'd love
to lobby for their *stay of execution*. Well yes,
if Missouri's State Governor
came to visit Roseau,
our Julian

would labor to reprieve those *wrongful deaths*,
to commute the wrongful over-
long life sentence. *O what more proof*!,
he asks, that a criminal
has redeemed

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himself, than *gifts sublime*
to a foreign land's humble Church Windows.
And the artists, alas, don't get
to sign their surnames
on their work.
So these immortal glass mosaics—
like aged tapestries
or Medieval embroideries—will stay anonymous.

6

O come, see the Missouri prisoners'
tribute to our endemic birds . . .
I follow Julian
up the winding narrow stairway
into the Tower. At each half-flight

of steps to the topmost
third story belfry, we stop to inspect the stained-glass
bird door, a swinging gate window
that opens outwards to bestow
full standup view
from window ledge of the world beyond: vistas I relish
of the far seashore
and high foothill cliffs leaning convergent upon the City
as I step, warily,
aloft—stooped on each wide stone windowsill, in turn,
and grappling the notched plaster lintel
at my head level for support.

Always, I hesitate to place both feet
on the sill at once. But Julian,
standing beside me,
his head now well below my waist,
chimes, tinkly-voiced: *fear not, it's*

quite safe to step out
and take in the whole sweet panoramas. He doesn't lift
a hand for leverage, but fraternal
voice will do; if human speech
could be translated
into poles and dowel rods, he gave me backup ladder. . . .
Now the Sisserou
Parrot, pieced together in its glass jigsaw colors, stands
at just my height.

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As I grip the window, outswung on its wobbly hinges
for a moment, I start to lose my balance.
Ah, I should never look down,

only up, out and away . . . I fight off
the temptation to clasp Julian's
shoulder; instead, I
pull the stained-glass Sisserou—
my twin for size & width—to my breast.

I can almost whiff scent
of his glass-inlaid yellow and orange crown of feathers.
Julian chuckles, as if he misreads
my panic—my embrace of the glass
secret bird Soul Kin—
as impulse of ardor, not dread of heights. But my head's
swimming with vertigo;
his smile's erasure is cure . . . I step down, then wend my way
up cramped staircase
to the last window foot-ledge, four in number, arranged
in a diamond aslant the Tower's circular
upsweep. Each bird door swings

upon a lushly diverse vantage of City
or seashore. And when I shuffle
into a fourth window
station, I'm lightheaded & easy—
the glass bill and claws of the Jako

Parrot tucked in my armpit
whispers boldness to my thighs, and I swing out so wildly,
even Julian grows cautious and tugs
me back into the stone wall frame
as we chat, randomly,
about the beauty of roofs, fort towers and stone piers
only half-visible
through the translucent sheen of perpetual sun showers.
No matter how thin
a veil the mist of constant rain provides, it distorts
and adorns the view, always shimmering
with new facets, new glamours . . .

Julian, yanking on the bell rope, rings
five sharp peals of the next hour—
singing, once more,
the Devil takes a bride, takes
a bride. O the wedding of sun and rain!

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MICHAEL McFEE

Yule Log

Just before Christmas, every year,
dad's rich friend Winston would send one
packed in dry ice, in a special box
stamped *Biltmore Dairy* in dark green cursive.

We'd bear it to the kitchen counter
and juggle the smoking ice into the sink
and slowly unroll the frozen paper
around this first and sweetest of presents:

a yule log made of *Premium* ice cream.
Its chocolate rind looked exactly like bark,
down to the scattered nut-knots;
its pith was a plug of creamy butter pecan

so authentic it almost had rings.
Mom held the long knife under the spicket
until it was finally hot enough
for dad to slice a piece for each of us,

a thin section from this section
of the tree of endless good cheer and luck
and wealth enjoyed at the Estate.
But we weren't jealous, there in the kitchen

of our home built of skinny logs
on land owned long ago by George Vanderbilt:
as dry-ice fog tried to sneak
cheap melodrama into the scene, we simply

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stood on the verge of Christmas
then filled our empty spoons and lifted them
and burned that log in our mouths,
its cold fire falling, filling our aching chests.

Glory

If a woman have long hair, it is a glory.
I Corinthians 11:15

Every time I use that green shampoo
or pass some unknown woman on the street
who's used it that morning, her hair still wet,
I inhale deeply
and think again of you
on top of me, your waterfall of hair
covering my hands covering your breasts
and cascading forward onto my chest
as you leaned down,
that charged green air
filling my head as I closed my eyes
and surrendered my skin to the exquisite
whispers of your hair as you swept it
over my drowning face,
my fingers rising
entwined in your glory, as they still do
every time you use that green shampoo.

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RICHARD TILLINGHAST

Currency

No bed for me in this city tonight, no key
in my pocket for anyone's door.
No cure for the rain
that revives the dusty quayside sycamores
and wears away the faces
on statues of the famous dead.

Decades gone, I'd amble these quays,
jingling the harps and salmons and peacocks in my pockets,
my sense of pure form freshened
by vertical parallels of 18th-century brick
that stripe the currents of rippled dull jade
careering down to the Irish Sea
between banked, peeling trunks
of river-drinking trees.

I must have blinked, though,
because now two girdered cranes,
one immemorial blue, one summer-camp green,
wrecking the lovely city brick by brick,
wheel in a cluttered sky
as weepy as the sad watercolors
my dead aunt used to paint.

The key changes, clouds modulate, sunshine
recurs. My footsteps
evanesce from the cobblestones.

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JOHN LOUGHERY

Woman as Other

THE M. H. DE YOUNG MUSEUM IN SAN FRANCISCO has a superb collection of American art, and a trip to the Bay Area has always meant for me a morning ramble in Lincoln Park and an hour or two with the de Young's Hudson River School landscapes, its Demuths and Hartleys, its Elmer Bischoffs and David Parks. Last spring, a small exhibition brought together some works from the permanent collection which, if not exactly flashy, were worth looking at for their high level of technical skill—and downright fascinating in connection with two New York shows that touched on a similar theme (i.e., the Thomas Wilmer Dewing retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum and "Picasso and Portraiture" at the Museum of Modern Art). The exhibition's title said it all: "The Exoticized Woman and Her Allure in American Art, 1865-1917."

The foreign, the "primitive," and the picturesque were major concerns in post-Civil War American culture. This was due, in part, to a robust economy and expanded leisure and travel opportunities (that is, if you weren't one of the immigrant poor or a newly freed slave), but the failure of native realism to take hold before 1900, despite the best efforts of people like William Dean Howells, Sarah Orne Jewett, Winslow Homer, and Eastman Johnson, also says something about "Gilded Age" America's view of itself as commercial, routinized, unmysterious, even boring. Frank Duveneck's *Venetian Woman* (1880), George de Forest Brush's *Celtic Huntress* (1890), and Elihu Vedder's *Sphinx of the Seashore* (1879) filled that void, as did a vogue for *chinoiserie* (plenty of fans and kimonos in these pictures) and a sudden—and quite superficial—interest in Native American life. Without belaboring the point or condescending to the painters it assembled, who ranged from the famous (Eakins, Whistler, Duveneck, J. Alden Weir) to the once-famous (Henry Fuller) to the obscure (Arthur Putnam), the de Young show left us pondering how effectively serious artists will evoke, consciously or otherwise, the repressed truths of their time.

In the case of late nineteenth-century America—and England, to judge by Steven Marcus and Peter Gay—the hidden reality was not about colonialism, aspirations to empire, greed or race relations, but an obsession with sex and a corresponding need to pretend that no such preoccupation existed. "The Exoticized Woman" nicely echoed that premise, showing us ladies drained of sweat and sinew, secrets and mischief, in a manner that painters from the Renaissance through the eighteenth century would have found odd indeed. Fuller's *Ebba Bohm*

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(1905) is as elegant and delicate as the iris she fingers; Whistler's draped figures are paradigms of exquisite ennui. We feel the art, but not the life. Yet the flesh isn't to be denied entirely, not when women of other cultures or fantasy lands were at last available to be the exemplars of earthiness and passion. Thomas Eakins' *Negress* (1867), nameless and resplendent in her multicolored turban; George Hart's languorous South Sea Islander; Arthur Putnam's *Mermaid* (1909); and Samuel Robb's painted zinc *Indian Maiden* (1875) all have two things in common. They are bare-breasted, and they won't ever be found reading *Harper's Weekly* in a brownstone drawing room. The reign of the "exoticized woman" was a thirty-year convention that promoted the myth that there were certain good women who were "above" sexuality, a notion many educated men heartily approved of—that is, until Sister Carrie and Daisy Buchanan came along to set them straight.

The spring exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum was also aptly titled: "The Art of Thomas Wilmer Dewing: Beauty Reconfigured." Emphasis on the last word. Few American artists have had as much natural facility with the brush or with pastel chalk as Dewing (1851-1938). He was capable of astonishing textures and color effects in an age that doted on such things. Yet, in his approach to his subject matter, he was on his own. His women have a weightlessness, an ethereal grace, that goes beyond "decorative" or "abstract" or "patterned," to use the three words most commonly associated with the Aesthetic Movement. They are, instead, transformed into something not quite human. There is a bit of spirit in *Portrait of Ella Batavia Emmett* (1886) with her glare and her pointed chin. We might make something of the rigid extended arm over the back of the chair—impatience, self-assurance?—in *Lady in a Green Dress* (1917). The mottled red background of *The Palm Leaf Fan* (1906) has a slight charge to it. But, beyond that, we are into an effacement of context and personality, a denial of strength and variety, that makes Whistler, who loved to subdue his models, look like a man with a Kodak.

One school of thought has it that too much shouldn't be made of iconography with someone like Dewing; the big names of the Aesthetic Movement should be judged on their craft, their achievement of a certain specialized kind of beauty. And on that score, Dewing is truly impressive. But, then, we are not looking at flowers and vases, sunsets and lakes (towards which social attitudes change too, of course, but that is another story). With Thomas Wilmer Dewing, we are looking at *people*, and we quite properly want to know not only what we think of his drawing, brushwork, compositions, and color, but what he is telling us about life as he knows it, about men and women. In this respect, he can keep modern viewers reeling. His women hold musical instruments they don't play, occupy the chairs they are seated on like objects arranged on a shelf, and are forced to vie for our attention with atmospheric backgrounds of shimmering perfection. *Lady in Gold* (1912) is a flawless study of near-monochromatic color schemes. *A Reading* (1897) has the blueish pallor of an invalid. *Brocart de Venise* (1904) takes reverie to the

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level of stupefaction. The Dewing canon is nothing short of amazing for its polish, consistency, mute ambition, and aggressive serenity.

I have a real fondness for artists who are crankily out of step with their time—and I don't mean only those geniuses who were *ahead* of their time (they are easy to appreciate)—and, beyond a doubt, there is a fierce against-the-current quality to Dewing as a man who lived to be a twentieth-century artist. To paint *The Singer* (1924) with her lute and peachbloom dress in the era of the flapper and the speakeasy surely took nerve. (Young Modernists like Charles Sheeler derided him at the time with the nickname "Nothing Dewing.") But what are *we* to make of him, now that Modernism itself has come and gone? En masse, his paintings are apt to suck the breath out of the viewer. They induce a cultural and visual claustrophobia that can be excruciating. Yet we have been so well-trained to inquire into the hidden dimensions of creative labor that it is hard not to wonder if there isn't a pertinent subtext at work. In other words, does Dewing want us to perceive the world his women inhabit as beautiful, but dismayingly narrow and passive? Has the matter been carried to such an extreme for a darker critical purpose (after all, these women have nothing in common with the social titans of John Singer Sargent or the busy women of William Merritt Chase or even the scrubbed virgins and angels of Abbott Thayer or George de Forest Brush)? Perhaps we should credit a hint of social or psychological awareness to Dewing's art. The disorienting artificiality of *The Recitation* (1891) and many of the other lush "green" paintings of the 1890s, in which none of the figures has any connection to the other or to their outdoor setting, would seem to lead us down that path. In spite of the weak evidence, one yearns to think so. If not, alas, the objectifying "otherness" of women has never been so thoroughly, even sadly, rendered by an American man.

With Picasso and women, we enter another level of intensity and subjectivity, a *Sturm und Drang* with lots of captivating power and no subtlety about it. Here formalists don't even try to pretend that psychology and sexual tensions are irrelevant to an understanding of the paintings. A lack of biographical information, particularly of Picasso's relationships with several key women, wives and mistresses (Olga Khokhlova, Maria-Thérèse Walter, Fernande Olivier, Sara Murphy, Dora Maar, Françoise Gilot, Jacqueline Roque), would render some of his most important paintings incomprehensible. Fortunately, the summer show at the Museum of Modern Art, "Picasso and Portraiture: Representation and Transformation"—a grand, splendidly arranged display of 130 paintings and 100 works on paper—told us just enough by way of its wall plaques to situate us intelligently and then let the images themselves do the rest. (There is one "howler" to be noted in the exhibition brochure, though. "Portraying subjects who were close to him, [Picasso] liberated portraiture from the vanity and egoism associated with commissions"—as if this artist and *any* of his subjects weren't highly, vainly, egotistically, aware of the specialness of sitting for a

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portrait with one of the most famous men ever to have lived. Paying for a portrait is not the only means of investing the process with vanity and ego.)

It is remarkable to realize that at this late date portraiture has not been an overly mined area of Picasso scholarship or museum exhibition. The Blue and Rose Periods, the Cubist innovations, Picasso's version of Surrealism, his quasi-abstractions—it would seem as if everything had been "covered." Yet clearly not; the galleries at MoMA were charged with an air of discovery and synthesis. The last two rooms were given over completely to self-portraits, from the brooding, painterly works of the 1890s to the now-famous Picasso "mask" from the Prague Museum that advertised the 1980 blockbuster and the gruesome ape-ish death's head of 1972. The better part of "Picasso and Portraiture," though, dealt not surprisingly with the women he knew. The most familiar of these were probably the stately *Gertrude Stein* of 1906, which seems to be as much about Stein's prose and persona as her real self, the bleached *Women in White* of 1923 (owned by the Metropolitan Museum and now known to be a portrait of Sara Murphy), and the many paintings from the 1930s and early 1940s in which his sitters' personalities become battlefields in wars the artist is determined not to lose. In *The Dream, Girl Before a Mirror, Woman at a Window,* and *Bather with a Beach Ball,* faces are masks, monstrous breasts slip out of dress tops, hands are huge and powerful. Women are reimagined as inflated body parts; Maria-Thérèse Walter and Dora Maar are now both muses and objects of frightening, manipulative energy. In *Seated Bather* (1930), Olga Khokhlova's bitterness toward her estranged husband is turned back on her as an image with insect-like appendages, fierce teeth and breasts, and an empty skull.

Portraiture has always been as much about the painter as the sitter, though the Medici and the Vanderbilts would have recoiled at the idea, but no one was quite as successful in forcing individuals to bend to his will, in life and on canvas, as the Spanish master of modern art. To be painted by Picasso was to be hunted and pinned like one of Nabokov's butterflies. These paintings are disturbing records of affection, hostility, and ultimately the distance the artist felt from the people around him, notably the women he loved and abandoned. The wonder was to be found in the rare moments of tenderness: the sincere admiration of the dark, realist portrait of Aunt Pepa from 1895, the softness of the pink hues behind Fernande Olivier in *Standing Female Nude* (1906), the dignity of the Cubist *Woman with a Fan* (1908), the intelligent composure accorded Dora Maar before things went wrong—moments all the more alluring and disturbing because we know what lies ahead for Picasso's women in the great maw of his creativity.

For anyone who cared about art and thought deeply about the aesthetic issues of the day, the crucial question at the turn of the last century was whether or not realism had a future. From the formulation of the laws of perspective and the development of new implements that

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led to the use of oil, brush, and canvas to the peak of the Italian High Renaissance and the Flemish masters on to Hogarth, Ingres, Courbet, and Eakins, the pageant had been a grand one, and the suspicion circa 1890-1910 was that the end of the line was in sight. It would be hard to imagine two exhibitions seen in the same month that better address this topic than the two most popular shows of 1996, the Winslow Homer and the Paul Cézanne retrospectives.

The Homer show, which was seen in Washington, Boston, and New York, was the definitive account of this artist's work, treating the early Civil War paintings, the illustrations, and the watercolors as scrupulously as the major periods of his genre painting and seascapes. But if we take Homer too much in the spirit of a chronicler of his time, or even simply as a first-rate craftsman, he does appear as the end-point, or close to it, of his tradition. *Northeaster* (1895), *Cannon Rock* (1895), and *Moonlight, Wood Island Light* (1894) may be realism going out with a bang, but they do not point to the future and the needs (aesthetic or philosophical) of a new era. So perhaps the conclusion is that Homer was a great painter who happened to live into a time that was driven to question his methods, not unlike Tolstoy overlapping Stein and Proust by a few years.

There were hints of Winslow Homer the ecstatic colorist in the show ("colorist" in the sense of an artist who goes so far as to put color before subject matter and drawing, a distinction the up-and-coming Modernists thrived on and the Victorians found ridiculous), and those were the important moments for this viewer. For example: the Zouaves in *Pitching Quoits* (1865) are a picturesque bit of social documentation, those Civil War troops who soon learned better about the kind of fight they had gotten themselves into. But I have often felt that it was the peculiar red of their shirts that truly interested Homer, and it was fun to look for it again, a sort of leitmotif, and to find it in *The Morning Bell* (1871), *Waiting for a Bite* (1874), *The Two Guides* (1875), and in a scarf in *The Wreck* almost thirty years later. The man may have "done" the vogue for croquet and the growth of tourism, but even by the late 1860s, the crest of a wave and a line of green against a sun-soaked wall were the whole world to him. Henry James expressed his distaste for Homer's "flat-breasted maidens, suggestive of a dish of rural doughnuts and pie." Had he seen the portrait of Helena DeKay, sister of art critic Charles DeKay and wife of Richard Watson Gilder? Painted during Homer's brief period under the influence of the Aesthetic Movement, the picture is not much more (or less) than a glow of violet, pink, and red, outdoing Whistler with an elegant lady who looks neither at the book on her lap nor out at the viewer, as artificial, self-conscious, sumptuous, and un-documentary an image as Oscar Wilde could have wanted. This is the other Winslow Homer.

But where to go from *Portrait of Helena DeKay* (1872) and the black, eerie, Böcklin-like *Cape Trinity* (1904)? Paul Cézanne understood the nature of this potential dead end and devised, though hardly overnight, the most original response of his time to the problem, breathing new life

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into the art form on the same scale achieved by Ibsen in modern drama and Joyce or Proust in modern fiction. The journey as well as the result was on view last summer at the Cézanne retrospective at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. It began with a little roughhousing, those early and lesser-known works that seem both a study and a parody of the overheated Delacroix and Géricault. (The National Gallery of Art's focus on early Cézanne a few years back was an instructive exhibition about the quality and importance of these bizarre, heavily painted still lifes and erotic, violent tableaux.) And it is important to begin at the beginning: Cézanne has been rendered by time, by academics, and by the hallowing aura of museums into a less aggressive, a calmer and more contained figure than he was. Rather, he had the qualities of an artist who appreciated the achievements of an earlier time but was made restless by the sense that they could not speak with final authority to the present. Ignoring convention and propriety, and in no danger of being lionized too soon, this contemporary of Zola and Maupassant avoided the chromatic and atmospheric wizardry of the Impressionists to aim for something with more solidity, with an Old Master-ish weight. Something less pretty and more troubling. Yet he was not of a temperament to veer off in any manic, "revolutionary," screw-the-past direction as the Futurists would a short time later. So Cézanne stuck to the classic genres—landscape, portraiture, still life—*and* he kept to decidedly recognizable forms. How vastly all this differs from Homer's realism was amply displayed in Philadelphia with a selection of over 100 paintings and 75 watercolors.

The interesting fact is that we respond to Cézanne's paintings in the first instant of exposure in much the same way we do to a Homer. Our mind takes note: "I know what that 'is.' It's a wave, it's an apple, it's a woman, whatever." But then, always, in the next second and from that time on, a remarkable thing happens as a dislocation registers upon us between what the mind *reads* as visually knowable and what the mind *knows* about the world—i.e., that those apples wouldn't stay on a table tilted like that, that no person could remain in a chair at that angle, that space isn't really as flat as it feels in *Portrait of Gustave Geffroy* (1895) or any of the still lifes. Yet this isn't really an "abstracting" process because we aren't allowed for one minute to forget the apples, chairs, people, or mountains of Provence. There is no fanciful "make believe" area in a Cézanne oil. It's nice that this is properly credited as the foregrounding of Cubism and all manner of aesthetic radicalism in the twentieth century, but it is really something in and of itself that is more important than what it led to. *Madame Cézanne in a Red Armchair* (1877) or *The Blue Vase* (1889) are at the very borderline of their genre, luring us into the shapes-and-colors realm of the purely aesthetic-contemplative, but refusing to let us roam there unfettered.

The two portraits of Victor Chocquet in the show, one from a private collection and one from the Columbus Museum of Art in Ohio, are among the most forceful examples of Cézanne's compelling, even

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devious pursuit. We want to know more about the angular, white-haired, thick-bearded sitter (isn't this a fair aspect of portraiture?), but we cannot help feeling silly about that interest when what we are standing before is so evidently "about" a new kind of color and brushwork. Fine, so we want to luxuriate in a fleck of red on a cheek or a face created by an almost sculptural "patching" effect of pigment, but then that too seems absurd as the subject of the work is so relentlessly himself, so obviously meaningful to the artist, and never "Whistlerized" or "Dewing-ed" out of his tangible existence. We are left to wonder, even ache, in the no-man's-land between Homer and Kandinsky, between secure realism and secure abstraction. We stand alienated from all of our pat learned responses. In this territory, Cézanne was not merely a master or a bridge; he was *sui generis*. Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Seurat do the same, but only to a degree—and that, for me, is the heart of Post-Impressionism (i.e., a focus on how much the visible world still means to us, how reluctantly we let go of its representation, *and* an acknowledgement that we need more from art now, that we self-consciously crave a sensation beyond the purely retinal). As this retrospective made clear in its well-chosen sampling of his work, Cézanne understood as well as anyone ever has the nature of the break between the nineteenth- and the twentieth-century approach to tradition, perception, and aesthetic experience.

This report has to end on a sour note, though. In naked truth, seeing the Cézanne exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum wasn't worth it, and I regretted making the trip from New York. It is possible that hundreds of thousands of people—Pennsylvanians and out-of-towners—have been nursing a secret hunger for Cézanne all these years and would have shown up anyway without the museum's relentless hype. Therefore, the hotel package deals and the shuttle busses and the cattleyard maze of an entrance path would have been inevitable, and the Cézanne "Bather" beach towels would have found their way into the museum's grand hall anyway (not the shop downstairs, mind you). And it's possible that many visitors had an intensely moving time despite the *nonstop* noise in the galleries from the docents' barking and the *loudest*, most aggressively hawked acousti-guides I've ever heard. (The Georgia O'Keeffe show in Washington in 1987 was nothing in comparison. This was like standing in a field of cicadas. I was unable to see one single picture in utter silence, which to my mind is equivalent to not seeing anything.) It's also possible that some viewers had a lively, contemplative hour or two at the Philadelphia Museum, a restorative immersion. But I doubt it, and I don't think this grubby, moneymaking circus had much to do with why painters like Cézanne struggle and create in the first place.

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KAREN WILKIN

British Sculptors Invade Paris

DOES TWO OF ANYTHING CONSTITUTE A TREND? If so, the new fashion in exhibitions is for overreaching titles attached to shows that deliver far less than they promise, shows that prove to be skewed, at worst, and highly selective, at best. I'm thinking of the Guggenheim's recent "Abstraction in the Twentieth Century" and last summer's "Un siècle de sculpture anglaise," at the Jeu de Paume. The former was not just spotty, but blatantly inaccurate; the latter was more thoughtful, but still erratic. Why? Not simply because calling a show that spanned eighty years "a century of British sculpture" was something of an exaggeration, but because, as at the Guggenheim, the coherent survey implied by an ambitious title was not borne out by the selections. "Un siècle de sculpture anglaise" included many first-rate works, but the gaps between them were conspicuous. Of course, the space constraints of the reincarnated Jeu de Paume must have played a role; the building is small and, what is more serious, narrow, so that the handsomely renovated galleries are often less than generous. Installing large-scale works by six sculptors in the Tuileries offered a partial solution to the problem, but more of that later.

The official word from the Jeu de Paume was that "only sculptors who really made a difference" were included. Did they mean sculptors who made a difference to the evolution of modernist sculpture in Great Britain or to modernist sculpture in general? No matter which, the selections still seemed rather capricious. As with the Guggenheim's abstraction show, the catalogue of "Un siècle de sculpture anglaise" is far more comprehensive than the exhibition, albeit no less problematic, since it has neither bibliography nor a coherent chronology nor wholly reliable information in places—unforgivable lapses in a publication that purports to be scholarly. Thoughtful articles by British critics fill in some holes, along with interviews, both reprinted and recent, with exhibited artists. The occasional slightly wrong-headed piece attempts to set British art in a "European" context, but these are mercifully few and short, and the whole publication is handsome and nicely produced.

The exhibition began, logically enough, with Jacob Epstein's *Torso of the Rock Drill,* 1915-16, that angular conflation of machine and man that succeeds in looking simian as much as mechanical or human. (Originally a full-length worker fused with his pneumatic boring tool, the sculpture was later cropped by the artist.) As a child raised on the stylized animal sculptures of the Central Park Zoo, I thought the title

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referred to a kind of monkey, the mandrill, and even today, I'm never sure if that brittle, snout-like head evokes a protective mask or the long, sad face of, say, a baboon. The armor-plated torso itself seems as insect-like as it does industrial.

Epstein, who emigrated to Britain from New York via Paris, at the age of twenty-five, was among modernism's most conspicuous standard-bearers in England before World War I, an advocate for a conception of sculpture wholly opposed to the sentimental naturalism of the Victorians; *Rock Drill* has become as an icon of those fresh ideas. When the sculpture was first exhibited in London, it provoked a reaction equivalent to the hostility aroused by Duchamp's curiously similar female figure, *Nude Descending a Staircase*, when it was seen in the 1913 Armory Show, yet Epstein's method of direct carving, and to a lesser extent, his generalized, geometricized forms became the norm for forward-thinking British sculptors until about the 1940s. Epstein's own commitment to formal innovation was short-lived, yielding to a conservative, feverishly modelled, expressionist figuration, but in his early years, he was undeniably someone who "made a difference," as Richard Cork makes clear in an informative catalogue essay about the artistic climate in England when *Rock Drill* was first—shockingly—shown. The essay underlines Epstein's significance and provides a point of departure for the entire show. Epstein wasn't alone, of course, but you can make a case for casting him in the role of symbolic ur-sculptor.

Fast-forward to the 1930s, to Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth, represented, respectively, by small, shallowly defined geometric reliefs built of circles played against squares and small, ambiguous sculptures ranging from hard-edged prismatic forms to melting ovoids. They looked fine together, but the selection, as a whole, seemed calculated to make Hepworth's individual contribution less significant than her affinities with Nicholson and—not surprisingly, in a European museum—her debt to Brancusi. These connections are real enough, but not the whole story. Given the explosion of vital polychrome sculpture in England in the 1960s and 1970s—a phenomenon acknowledged by the exhibition—Hepworth's early experiments with color could have figured as antecedents, but you'd never have guessed that she worked in anything but white marble from the sculptures that shared the vitrine with Nicholson's severe, white painted reliefs. (Whether Nicholson's frontal, planar constructions are sculpture or paintings whose shapes are defined by changes in level is another matter.)

If Hepworth and Nicholson seemed narrowly defined by "Un siècle de sculpture anglaise," their friend and colleague, Henry Moore, was treated more fairly. Unlike almost anyone else, Moore was represented by an admirable selection covering several decades: spiky "surrealist" pieces from the 1930s, the celebrated seated *King and Queen* (1952-53), a group of small reclining figures from the mid-fifties to the mid-sixties, including a maquette for the UNESCO sculpture in Paris, and two larger pieces from the 1960s, a full-size plaster maquette and a two-part bronze.

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The small reclining figures may have been chosen as an expedient way of presenting Moore's best-known theme in depth, but they are among his strongest works. Moore's large, public sculptures often seem rhetorical—literally inflated and hollow—but his small figures almost always achieve a wonderful rightness of scale, a harmonious balance between surface and mass, and his habitual comparisons of the body with bones, pebbles, and shell fragments seem more convincing and expressive than they do in his monumental sculptures. It was instructive, too, to compare the small figures with the large plaster maquette at the Jeu de Paume; the surface texture of the plaster seemed like pure afterthought, something arbitrarily added to liven things up, when all questions about shape, form, and mass had already been decided; by contrast, the play of dark and light that animated the little bronze maquettes was wholly integral to their vigorous modelling, a record of the sculptor's manipulating hand as he squeezed and patted forms into existence.

Fast-forward again, skipping most of the 1950s, to Anthony Caro, for whom Moore "really made a difference," when the younger artist worked as his assistant from 1951 to 1953. Moore introduced Caro to surrealism, African and pre-Columbian art, and a host of other things a conservative education at the Royal Academy failed to provide. A more dramatic transformation came after 1959, when Caro made his first trip to the U.S. and, through Clement Greenberg, met such adventurous artists as Kenneth Noland, Helen Frankenthaler, Adolph Gottlieb, and David Smith. The Americans' formal daring impressed the young sculptor deeply. Their uninhibited abstraction seemed to point a way out of his own aesthetic dilemma, his growing conviction that the figure got in his way. On his return to England, Caro began to work in steel, drawing upon the implications of Smith's work, but abandoning definitively reference to anything already existing, and produced a group of unignorable steel constructions that still appear fresh and unexpected.

At the Jeu de Paume, Caro was represented not by any of these seminal works, but by a group of his exuberant, polychrome constructions of the late sixties, audacious sculptures that seem to defy gravity and miraculously suspend forms in the air, their expressive power a function not of specific allusion, but of the way elements are disposed in space and touch. Several Table Pieces were included, those smaller works that explore, in purely visual terms, the distinction between things that can be picked up and things that can't; the earliest incorporate actual handles and grips, placed in illogical, impractical ways. A selection, in short, of excellent, representative pieces, well displayed, with the exception of the enigmatic *Window*, 1966-67, a cool, classicizing "enclosure" with a visually unstable mesh plane; *Window* was crammed into a narrow space, set at a curious angle that suggested, mistakenly, that the sculpture's carefully defined and defended precincts should be entered.

It's difficult to fault the inclusion of any of these pieces, but Caro is a protean artist who has never settled for a single approach. For thirty-five years, he has probed the limits of sculptural possibilities to produce

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original and eloquent art that has irrevocably changed perceptions of what sculpture can be. I'm not sure that Moore's history can be described this way, despite his being venerated as the Grand Old Man of British art at the end of his life. Why then, did the exhibition sketch the trajectory of Moore's whole career, but reduce Caro's evolution to a few, admittedly very good years?

Promenade, 1996, the monumental work commissioned for the show, installed in the Tuileries, may have been intended to redress the balance. The result was impressive, a slow parade of five massive, sixteen-foot-tall, dark grey sections, deployed down the center allée of the garden like, a British visitor observed, "a battleship steaming down the path." Like many of Caro's newer works, *Promenade* explores the relation of a visually, imaginatively, or sometimes literally enterable interior, and an enclosing, often excluding exterior, issues common in architecture, but rarely addressed in purely sculptural terms. Best perceived as you walk beside it, so that your own body becomes a measure of its openings and extensions, *Promenade* reads perilously like "useless" architecture—perhaps over a certain size, abstract sculpture *automatically becomes* a kind of architecture—but that same size and amplitude allow the work to hold its own, even dominate, a magnificent, daunting space freighted with historical associations. That's an achievement in itself. *Promenade* may not rank among Caro's unarguable masterpieces; it's the only one of his sculptures that, because of the terms of the commission, had to be fabricated instead of being made in his studio, and it's a little uninflected, as a result. But it is nonetheless a *tour de force,* a subtle behemoth of great presence and engaging complexity.

Caro's reputation rests, in part, on his teaching at London's St. Martin's School of Art, where he was known as a stimulating, undogmatic presence who encouraged students to follow their own bents. Conceptual artists such as Gilbert and George, as well as Richard Long, came out of his classes, but Caro was closest to a group of constructivist sculptors about ten years his junior. In the early sixties—the years of the Beatles and Carnaby Street—they created exciting, brilliantly-colored works in plastic, fiberglass, metal, glass and other untraditional materials, in a rowdy alliance of Brancusi's volumetric forms and Caro's own brand of freewheeling construction. Bryan Robertson's splendid catalogue essay recreates the sense of energy and infinite possibilities of this extraordinary moment in the history of British art, a watershed period made all the more remarkable by its defiance of the national preference for literary, as opposed to wordless, expression. The gifted members of the "New Generation," as a memorable show of their work was called, included Philip King, Tim Scott, Isaac Witkin, William Tucker, among others, yet despite their considerable talents and considerable reputations, only King, inexplicably, was included in the Paris exhibition, represented by a group of playful polychrome conical structures, and a wiggly vertical piece, like two filtertip cigarette butts crushed together,

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all from the early sixties, plus the large multicolored, linear *Quill*, 1971, in the Tuileries. His colleagues were, at least, listed in the catalogue's final section, a sort of *Petit Larousse Illustré de la sculpture*, "a little dictionary of 20th-century British sculptors," potentially useful, but full of factual errors, wrong dates, and confused sequences.

After King, literature largely took over, in the guise of Duchamp-inspired conceptualism. Eduardo Paolozzi's irreverent collages, for example, far outnumbered his three-dimensional constructions, although in fairness, it should be noted that the organizers of the exhibition financed the restoration of one sculpture's elaborate polychromy. Gilbert and George were present on film, recreating the famous *Singing Sculpture*, twenty years after its first performance in 1971. Richard Long was there, with circles of rocks and ample photo documentation. In both instances—as in many other works in the show—idea, description, and verbal narrative were plainly of greater significance than object or "artifact." But there were also high points along the way, such as Richard Deacon's sculptures of the early 1980s (badly installed, however, against a background of a Tony Cragg plastic detritus wall piece and Bill Woodrow's ramshackle junk sculptures, most conspicuously, *Elephant*, 1984, a metaphor for the decline of empire, *on dit*, loosely assembled of car parts, oddments, and maps). Deacon, unlike many of his contemporaries, has a real sculptural sensibility and, frequently, a sure sense of scale. His weirdly assorted materials—patterned vinyl, fabric, galvanized metal—seem chosen both to force attention on his jammed volumes and to declare their allegiance to Cubist collage, while making viewers reconsider notions of hardness and softness, extension and containment, in provocative ways. The curving members of a large, slightly later work in the Tuileries, however, seemed too attenuated for its volume, but it might have been better indoors.

Anish Kapoor's elegant tableau of seemingly unstable piles of pigment, *1000 Names*, 1981, suffered from the unfortunate proximity of a tall window with a blind whose slats inadvertently echoed the proportions and rhythms of the stepped red pyramid that was the climax of the piece. As is typical of Kapoor's best works, the sculpture had a rich multiple reading, shifting between the intimacy of the bazaar and the monumentality of architecture.

The exhibition's curator, Daniel Abadie, takes a wide view of what comprises sculpture, according the same importance to idea as to structure, to two-dimensional diagram as to three-dimensional object. I'm still not convinced, however, that most of the "idea" pieces really provoked experience equivalent to the intense physical presentness that I associate with really powerful sculpture. The difference was brought home by the juxtaposition of the (obligatory, it seems) Damien Hirst sliced cow and calf, described by wits as "the first British beef to cross the Channel legally since the outbreak of Mad Cow Disease," and Rachel Whiteread's pale *Ghost*, 1989, a plaster "negative" of a room, reassembled inside out. Both were fundamentally literal and literary, but the

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Hirst never transcended the fact of being made of dead animals. His formaldehyde-filled aquariums are simply updated Duchamp urinals, designed to shock, to make you wonder what a dead cow is doing in an art gallery in the first place. Whiteread turns the anecdotal reversal of the hollow of a grate, the swell of a doorframe into sculpturally realized metaphor. At the Jeu de Paume, *Ghost* suffered from overhead lighting that shone through the cracks, rendering the cube of stacked plaster casts papery and insubstantial. The piece should be perceived as solid, like a black hole bleached into visiblity, made into an implacable mass. Like Hirst, Whiteread has precedents, specifically Bruce Nauman's cast of the space under his chair—interestingly, a far more abstract, hard-to-decipher object than Whiteread's. What I've seen of her work so far makes me want to see more, but there wasn't room for more in the Jeu de Paume.

That seems typical of the show: good as far as it went, but frustrating in what wasn't there, and not wholly convincing as the most authoritative word. I must credit Abadie, however, with at least one inspired choice: Barry Flanagan's fifteen-foot-long bronze hare, *Hospitality*, 1990. Installed in the Tuileries near the Round Pond, it looked simply wonderful—silly, intensely serious, overblown. It would be nice if the hare could remain, floating against the newly replanted young chestnut trees of the symmetrical French garden, a happy compromise between traditional formality and newfangled outrageousness.

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MARCIA B. SIEGEL

Multicult—The Show

ETHNICITY PLUS STAGE SPECTACLE equals a smash hit formula on Euro-American stages. It has for a couple of centuries now. Producers of both highbrow and lowbrow entertainments have understood the thrill of the exotic, especially when it's posed against the familiar. These fusions seem more plentiful than ever in recent years. As funding cutbacks reduce performance activity among indigenous music and dancemakers, as the costs of high-art performing institutions continue to rise, spectacle becomes an increasingly viable staging-ground for collaborations and even experiment. Unlike the perilous nonprofit arts, spectacle rests on the edge of commercial enterprise; its high costs can yield high revenues. For economic and other reasons, it is extremely user-friendly, has great demographic appeal, and might be a major factor in keeping theater alive in these depleted times.

While still recovering from *Riverdance*, I realized that I'd seen half a dozen similar shows in the past few months. They all focussed on a national or ethnic style, but they all reinvented tradition in some way to suit modern agendas. The Balé Folclórico da Bahia fused European contemporary dance ideas about design and body shaping with traditional Brazilian dance and martial arts. Conjunto Folklorico Nacional de Cuba reconstructed folk and social dances in handsome period costumes, emphasizing a strife-free Afro-Hispanic cultural duality. The National Ballet of Spain's programming was devoted to stagey versions of folk and flamenco dancing, plus a local retelling of *Medea*, choreographed in a Grahamesque declamatory style with interpolations of flamenco.

Although ethnic shows may want us to believe we're seeing some "pure" essence of a people, we know that culture and cultural forms don't remain static. Tribal groups migrate and mix; their dances get suppressed or exploited; technology adds its enhancements. Politics often pays the piper and calls the tune. The touring Cubans acknowledged the bicultural background of their dances, but disguised history's contentious moments under a party atmosphere. Les Ballets Africains of Guinea, one of the oldest folkloric companies (it was founded in 1952, before Guinea became an independent nation), brought New York a collection of tribal dances from different regions and neighboring countries, folded into a two-act story-ballet format with a Guinean legend as a theme. Les Ballets' purpose wasn't to exhibit archival dances as the Cubans did, but to dramatize cultural and moral lessons for the

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audience, using the dances, music, and storytelling as a didactic device. The American audience embraced this as a fast, flashy, exotic entertainment with definite racial appeal. The way the African dances blurred into a fairly generic style resembled the modern street dances influenced by jazz, tap, Brazilian capoeira, and MTV, that were spun together in the funky downtown hip-hop show *Jam on the Groove.*

Riverdance so far exceeded these and other intercultural performances, in ambition, in scale, that it began to look like a whole new animal, not just a syncretic blend of known ingredients. Irish step-dancing seems an unlikely premise on which to build an extravaganza. It's a tight, modest style focussed on rapid footwork. You have to hear it in order to see it. But *Riverdance* sailed through New York after more than a year of packed audiences in Dublin and London. In five days at Radio City Music Hall (capacity 5,900), it played to what amounts to the population of a small American city. Then it toured several more Irish cities and returned to London. An American tour has been announced for this fall, starting with three weeks at Radio City (October 2-20). As a big commercial success, *Riverdance—The Show* has already hatched press kits, slick program books, a video, a CD, a tape cassette, and at least one scholarly paper. Not only did the public fame of the show escalate quickly, the show itself had gone through quite a bit of evolution by the time it reached New York. In a way, its career is a condensed version of the way culture itself adapts, expands, and reconfigures constantly over the course of time.

Like Pan-Africana and Hispanic shows, *Riverdance* doesn't pin down specific dances, dance forms, or even the identity of the performers in each number. Nothing in the extensive program book or press material tells us the specific social, spiritual, or entertainment origins of any number. The show proposes instead a new form of Irish dancing, an exteriorization of the genre's quiet expertise and its ability to assimilate outside influences. Rooted in an ancient Celtic past, Irish dancing hybridized with English country dancing and then evolved into the highly specialized routines of twentieth-century step-dance competitions. The current big resurgence of Irish dancing, both in Ireland and here in the States, partakes of all these precedents. The training puts an emphasis on intricate footwork—clogging in hard, loud shoes, and a more airborne style done in soft shoes. Nothing whatever is made of the upper body, the back stays ramrod straight, the arms pulled down at the sides. The body is carried in a single unit over the legs, the focus front. Everything, all at once, thrusts down into the ground or bounds up or pivots into a new direction. The basic rhythm is a string of fast, equal beats, like a locomotive chugging down a track, with embellishments of intermediate taps, brushes, clicks, stamps, flutters, and syncopations in superhuman abundance.

For all but a dedicated step-dance fan, though, the fascination of this might wear off quite soon. Irish dancing and its relatives, flamenco, Kathak, clog, tap, and all other kinds of rhythm dancing, do well in close

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quarters, where the audience is watching and listening appreciatively. The bigger the venue, the more it seems the dance has to expand, to reach out, to make the flourishes more visible, and to introduce extra tricks. Volume, visibility, virtuosity. Perhaps these are some of the defining needs of spectacle. *Riverdance* flaunts them all.

The basic step-dance gets amplified in several ways, most prominently by the effect of large numbers of dancers doing the intricate rhythms in unison. Microphones placed along the edges of the stage literally amplify the sound of their steps to a fusillade, shrouded in the electronic sibilance of a rock concert. The groups are usually arrayed in close ranks facing the audience, a chorus line effect that automatically sends our temperature up a few notches. Having locked onto this gambit, they add a few more standard come-ons from show business: the heads whipping to the side one by one precisely on the beat, the end poses in profile with the heads turned provocatively to the audience, and even a unison high kick or two. These are always understated, as if the dancers wouldn't know how to make a hard sell.

Step dancing has a natural elevation, or the potential for it, and *Riverdance* pushes the movement into the air with high, straight-up jumps. The jump can be decorated with heel clicks or cakewalk struts, but it keeps its vertical character. Step dancing has a lot in common with ballet, and the female soloist, Jean Butler, is tall, blond and slim, with long legs. She looks a bit like Darci Kistler, and it's only a momentary surprise when she hops up onto the tips of her toes. Butler's exceptional elevation allows her to turn the mechanics of the step into big gestures, one leg hooking back hip-high or hitching across the other knee while she springs into the air. Toe-stands get interpolated by the other dancers too. Traveling while continuing the rhythm is another addition to the lexicon.

These innovations might be attributable to *Riverdance*'s original choreographer, the American Michael Flatley, although Flatley left the show before it came to New York and was listed among several other people in the choreographic credits. Colin Dunne, who replaced him as the male soloist, is a super dancer, but he shares the company's restrained performing style. It's only when you look at *Riverdance—The Video*, taped in 1995 at one of the early performances in Dublin's Point Theatre, that you can understand what it was about the show that smote these audiences.

Flatley's dance is wildly eclectic. While his feet are reeling out some mind-boggling rhythmic puzzle, his upper body is beguiling us, telling us to forget about all that cognitive stuff and fall in love with him. His torso twists into the evasions of flamenco, then spreads to confront us with Broadway pizzazz. His arms, sprung from their prison at the sides, curl up around his head, jut in decorative angles, whip him around into extravagant finishing poses. All the while he grins at the audience, as if there's nothing to it.

Flatley has imparted some of this arsenal to the rest of the dancers,

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but what he really brought to the show was sex appeal and star appeal. The ensemble looks prim and preppy despite the women's long, crimped hair and modish miniskirts, the men's tight pants and flowing shirts. On the video Jean Butler offers Flatley some well-bred smiles in their chaste duets, but the only steamy seductions occur when he partners Maria Pagés, an exponent of fusion flamenco who was with the show from the beginning. Having seen the video after the New York run, I now think the whole show must have shifted in tone without Flatley's presence.

It also shifted, since the first Dublin season, in the cast of characters and perhaps in concept. *Riverdance* is built like a variety show, a series of specialty acts with the dance ensemble as a recurrent theme holding it together. In addition to Maria Pagés, Colin Dunne, Jean Butler and the 36-member Irish Dance Troupe, the New York show included the Anúna singers, an a cappella group specializing in modern arrangements of folk and ancient music; tap dancers Tarik Winston and Daniel B. Wooten, alumni of *Black and Blue*, TV, and other showy venues; youngsters from the New York school of Donny Golden, Jean Butler's teacher; six Moiseyev dancers constituting themselves as the Moscow Folk Ballet Company; and assorted solo singers and musicians. On the Dublin video there are three tap dancers and a gospel choir as well.

Some of this roster has stylistic cohesion. You can trace the connections between tap, flamenco, and Irish dancing way back. Perhaps the Russians were thought of as related to the Eastern European migrants who have influenced modern Irish culture, though what they did was mostly balleticized leaps and folky spins. The multiculturalism worked best in New York when the tappers challenged the male step-dancers and after an escalating duel of rhythms, they combined styles. In a way, the show looks more Irish—albeit a synthesized, invented Irish—without Flatley. The ensemble itself, with Dunne and Butler more equally blended in, became the show's visual center and, together with Bill Whelan's music, its rhythmic heart.

The score, yet another syncretic artifact, uses traditional Irish instruments in combination with other ethnic sounds, contemporary keyboards and electrified strings. The same modern chordal progressions, perhaps constructed on an initial fiddle tune, recur throughout the show, especially during the big dance ensembles. They get modified rhythmically and re-orchestrated, but their driving pulse begins to infiltrate your subconscious. Loaded through Radio City's massive sound system, the beat is irresistible, and by the end, when all the dancers advance to the footlights and the theme comes back, the audience can do nothing but produce an ovation. It's show-biz magic. George Balanchine switched us on with the massed corps, the flag, and Sousa's famous march at the end of *Stars and Stripes*—invoking our patriotic reflexes. Bill Whelan manages to program the audience for this new Irish imagery in a single performance.

Riverdance had other attractions. Virtuoso musicians played soprano

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saxophones, drums, Irish bagpipes, castanets and Russian mandolins. Eileen Ivers, a manic American fiddler, finished every solo with the strings lashed off her bow and flinging around like a horse's tail. The Anúna singers interpolated songs of nostalgia and longing for a change of pace. There were scenic projections and stage mist. And there was even a kind of story that ran through the show, about the settling of the Irish homeland and the subsequent diaspora into North America. A poetic, unintelligible voice intoned it through a hundred loudspeakers like the Word of God.

What *Riverdance* is really about is Irish nationalism. The show was born as a 7-minute intermission number at the 1994 Eurovision song contest, and was built up from there. Glowing ads in the program encourage us to buy Irish recordings, whiskey, and other products, and to visit this strife-torn country that's trying to be an entity in the modern world. Tourism and political credibility are being promoted, as they are, I guess, in all multicultural performances. What's truly multicultural about the modern world is how much we share—computers and TV, traffic, loud music, jeans and sneakers comprise the cultural style most kids grow up with, even in remote places. So national distinctions must be fabricated, partly out of old traditions, partly out of synthesized new aspirations.

Riverdance's fall Radio City run was announced with maximum splash—a two-page color ad in the Sunday *Times* Arts and Leisure—like an eager Oscar prospect. American connoisseurs will disdain this whole idea, the arts and Mammon having parted ways decades ago, about the same time art supposedly swore off politics. But this and many other performance packages today evade those easy categories. They are by nature commercial and political, even when they are engaged in the reclamation of art. Nationalism may be a dictator's platform; it's also an emerging population's means of establishing community. Tourism may weaken the authenticity of art forms, but it also gives artists work.

It seems to me this genre must be taken seriously; it has the energy not only of enterprise but of discovery. Its creators don't yet know what contemporary art is for their cultures. The issue of what and how to perform isn't settled yet. Contemporary American dance on this level of visibility—from Peter Martins to Stephen Petronio—is predictable: technically accomplished, visually stunning, with a veneer of polished modernity, but its motivation seems automatic, self-sustaining. I don't get this feeling from most multicultural shows. To present their version of a culture in and to the world means something to these artists, and it's moving to catch them in the act. I've never been to Ireland, but it's hard to imagine I'd find a more authentic or enjoyable Irishness there than I did on the stage of *Riverdance.*

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RICHARD HORNBY

The Other Stratford

THE FESTIVAL THEATRE AT THE STRATFORD SHAKESPEAREAN FESTIVAL in Ontario, Canada, is my favorite theatre in the world. It was constructed in 1957 from designs by architect Robert Fairfield, who won his share of awards for it, but the inspiration actually came from stage director Tyrone Guthrie, and his scene designer Tanya Moiseiwitsch. Many theatres are designed with very little consultation with the people who will actually use them; at one such theatre I worked in, with horrible acoustics and sightlines, we vowed that if the architect ever again set foot in the building, we would blow the place up with him in it. Not so at Stratford. Guthrie and Moiseiwitsch not only had strong views about what a good theatre should be, they also had the practical experience of having run performances in a tent on the same spot since 1952.

Guthrie believed in the open stage, with the actors on a bare platform surrounded by audience, instead of behind a proscenium arch separated from them. He loved acting, but hated the star system, and so, with Moiseiwitsch, designed a thrust stage with a permanent stage house up center, with a pillar in front so that entrances had to be made on the diagonal. The result was natural flowing movement, and picturesque groupings, but no dramatic solo entrances. Shakespeare at Stratford under Guthrie meant strong production concepts and fine ensemble work rather than vehicles for stars.

The Festival Theatre has also turned out to be ideal for a repertory company. Rotating repertory, with a bill of plays constantly alternating, has become rare in the theatre, even in Europe, because modern scenery tends to be so ponderous that change is time-consuming and expensive, and storage demands overwhelming. Stratford's thrust stage means that scenery is much simplified; it is usually a matter of a few set pieces or decorative touches added to the unchanging basic architecture. Props, costumes, and, especially, lighting become design elements at least coequal with settings. Change becomes fast and easy, so that, for example, I was able to see three different large-scale productions on the Festival Theatre stage in only two days.

King Lear on the Festival Theatre stage starred William Hutt, a world-class actor who is nonetheless little known outside Canada. This is because, like many Canadian actors, he has done little film or television work, focusing mainly on the stage. He has the strong face of a good stage actor—large nose, firm mouth, intense eyes—plus a resonant, flexible voice. Unlike a movie star, but typically for someone in a stage repertory company, he is decidedly a character actor; this was, in fact, his

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thirty-third season at Stratford, where his roles have included Falstaff, Richard II, James Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey into Night*—and Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest*!

Hutt was a superb Lear, playing the arc of the character perfectly, from the petulant, impatient manipulator in the opening scenes, through betrayal, loss, and madness, to the final simple old man who has learned through suffering. Designer Patrick Clark set the play in late nineteenth-century Vienna, the elegant, brittle world of operetta, which suited Lear's love of pomp and show. It was clear at the outset that the love contest had been set up in advance, and was being staged throughout by the King, until Cordelia spoiled the show by refusing to play her role. Although *Lear* does not have a play-within-the-play like *Hamlet*, it is indeed a play about theatricality, about role-playing, until the roles are stripped away.

The test of any Shakespeare festival is not so much in its lead actors as in its supporting casts. Richard Monette, Artistic Director of the Festival since 1994, directed an exceptionally strong ensemble in *King Lear*, with most of the older roles going to Stratford regulars—Eric Donkin, in his twenty-fifth season at Stratford, a fatuous yet sensitive Gloucester; Lewis Gordon (twenty-ninth season), a tough, staunch Kent; and Barry MacGregor (seventeenth season), a cold, militaristic Albany. These veteran actors have the ability to speak quietly, yet with great intensity; Gordon is particularly good at this, so that Kent's inner passion illuminated the performance.

It is impossible to list all the many other fine actors in the show, but I will single out Geordie Johnson, who played Edmund in clerical garb, which reflected the character's fake piety and brotherly affection. This costuming, another example of Patrick Clark's creativity, again expressed the theatricality of the characters in this play, the outward show hiding a different inner reality.

The beguiling simplicity of Meredith Willson's *The Music Man* conceals the fact that it took him eight years and some thirty drafts to write. The Stratford Festival Theatre production, similarly, was so beautifully done as to seem effortless, but in fact must have been terribly difficult to put on. The orchestra, superbly conducted by Berthold Carrière, was in a loft above the stage (like the musicians at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre), so that they and the performers could not see each other. The songs in the show are not particularly hard to sing, but some, like "Pick-a-Little, Talk-a-Little," have tricky rhythms, while others, like the "Train" opening number or "Seventy-Six Trombones," have fast tempos and innumerable entrances. It would be hard for an ensemble to keep together even if they could see the conductor's baton, but the Stratfordians managed to do so singing blind. Moreover, crowd scenes of any kind can be difficult on an open stage, but never more so than when the crowd has to sing and dance! Brian MacDonald both directed and choreographed, with the result that the music numbers seemed to erupt with a glorious inevitability; the action would rise to a level of emotional intensity that had to express itself musically. MacDonald's

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choreography was exuberant and imaginative—I particularly liked the "Marian the Librarian" number, which had the lead performer doing breathtaking leaps and falls all over the sedate library setting—yet always precise, and fully visible from every part of the auditorium.

June Crowley was perfect as the spinster librarian, with just the right mixture of beauty and reserve, plus a knockout soprano voice. Dirk Lumbard was athletic and charming as the con man Harold Hill, the role immortalized by Robert Preston, but, despite his undeniable skill as a singer and dancer, I felt he was miscast. There is a theory that there are two kinds of successful actors, the lights and the darks. Light actors exude charm, ease, familiarity; they make us comfortable. A good example would be Robert Redford, who seems in every role like an old friend we are delighted to see once again. Dark actors, on the other hand, radiate danger, anger, disruption; they make us feel pleasurably terrified, as if on a roller coaster ride. A good example would be Marlon Brando, always unpredictable, always on the edge, who, even in comedies, seems capable of killing somebody. For all the charm and simplicity of *Music Man,* Hill really is a dark part, a jaded con man who has duped dozens and seduced hundreds, who enters the Iowa town of River City almost sorry for his potential victims. He should come on like Faust to Margaret, but Lumbard just seemed like a nice young man who would never harm a fly. The rest of the cast and chorus were flawless, however, all the more amazing when you consider that most were hired for the Festival primarily as actors. I usually feel, with musicals at places like Stratford, that I am watching Actors Who Sing and Actors Who Dance (standard audition categories) rather than real singers and dancers, but these were the genuine article.

Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus* on the Festival Theatre stage starred Brian Bedford, in his fifteenth season at Stratford. Shaffer is the kind of playwright who can never resist more puttering with a script. *Amadeus,* which deals with Mozart as seen through the jealous eyes of the second-rate composer Antonio Salieri, has gone through many versions, including the screenplay for the film, with results that I find disappointing. Everything has now become motivated and logical, especially Salieri's decision in the second act to impersonate the ghost of Mozart's father, but the wild theatricality of the version I saw in the early eighties is diminished. In particular, I remember the music being central to the play; now, it is mere background. Perhaps this was the choice of Director Richard Monette, but the musical passages seemed abbreviated, and low in volume, so that we no longer shared Salieri's sense of wonder at their unexplained magnificence. The role of Katherina Cavalieri, Salieri's protégée whom Mozart seduces by writing her a showy aria in *Cosi Fan Tutti,* has all but disappeared. She does not even sing anymore onstage; we only hear her, briefly, way in the background.

Bedford is a good actor, who played Salieri reasonably well, though he did not seem remotely Italian, a distinction that the script makes in several places. He played the transitions from age to youth and back again very convincingly, however, and his lengthy commentary and witty

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asides were compelling. Most of the rest of the cast were satisfactory, especially Colombe Demers (also a strong Cordelia in *Lear*) as Mozart's wife, who effectively made the difficult transition from sexy young Viennese in the first act to long-suffering impoverished housewife in the second. Stephen Ouimette was a weak Mozart, however, who looked too old in the opening scenes, where the generation gap between him and Salieri is important. But my problems with the production could mostly be traced back to the script, which has been tamed. Certainly, Desmond Heeley's designs were elegant, and Monette's staging was once again proficient.

The Stratford Festival has expanded into two other theatres, the Avon and the Tom Patterson. The Avon, originally constructed in 1900 as a vaudeville house, went the way of all such theatres by becoming a cinema, but has been felicitously restored for live performance. I saw two productions in it, an awkward version of *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, and an outstanding rendition of *The Merchant of Venice*. The Festival usually runs a token new Canadian play each season. This *Alice*, bluntly adapted by the overrated (at least in Canada) James Reaney, seemed little more than a cutting of the Lewis Carroll original. There was far too little music or dance, which the material cries for in performance, and the puppetry, except for a sensational Jabberwock monster, looked stiff and amateurish. The darker elements in the original, which is notorious for terrifying children while entertaining them, were eradicated; with bland settings by Stephen Britton Osler, unimaginative costumes by John Pennoyer, and unfocused direction by Marti Maraden, all was sweetness and light behind this looking glass. In the title role, young Ashley Taylor was limited by her shrill, monotonous voice, but she had some of the character's self-confidence and horse sense. The rest of the cast included many Stratford regulars, some of whom, like Douglas Rain as Humpty Dumpty, occasionally brought this tepid production to life.

By contrast, the production of *The Merchant of Venice*, also directed by Maraden on the same stage, was the best version of that dark and difficult "comedy" that I have ever seen. It is challenging, especially since the Holocaust, to handle the character of Shylock. In most productions, anti-Semitism becomes the defining trait, as the director and actors try to avoid it, exaggerate it, or even (as in the Peter Hall version, starring Dustin Hoffman) turn it into its opposite. But, although the play is actually loaded with anti-Semitism, to the point where one might question performing it at all, that is not its central issue. The play might actually be retitled "Of Human Bondage," since it explores bonds of all kinds, of law, friendship, business, domestic service, marriage, family, and religion. The characterization of Shylock has to be seen in this context, especially since Jews in Shakespeare's day were seen as having been false to their religious commitments by rejecting Christ as the Messiah. (The anti-Jewish prejudice in the play is entirely religious, not racial.)

The other trap in performing this play lies in its locale. Venice is the

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most beautiful city in the world, so that designers naturally want to carry its picturesqueness over into their settings. But Shakespeare's Venice is not like the real Venice at all; it is a place of scarcity and debt, of ruthless business practices, and of strict laws. Antonio, the title character (Shylock is *not* a merchant, but a moneylender), sets the tone in his opening line, "In sooth, I know not why I am so sad." In Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, written soon after, and also set in Venice, we hear of St. Mark's Square, gondolas, and courtesans, but Shakespeare mentions only the Rialto (a place of business), while the only woman we see in Venice is Shylock's daughter Jessica, who leaves as fast as she can.

Venice in the play is contrasted with Portia's Belmont, a place of music, leisure, a love contest, and incredible wealth. (Portia, upon hearing of Antonio's debt, instantly offers to pay it many times over.) Only women are living there (aside from servants), in contrast to the masculine Venice. Set Designer Phillip Silver's notes for the Avon Theatre production showed his rare understanding of the contrasts in the script: "What interested me was the challenge of creating two worlds: the airiness of Belmont and a claustrophobic Venice." Silver used sliding gray screens to create cold, drab, confined areas in Venice. Costume Designer John Pennoyer not only clothed the Venetians in the 1930s—an austere time indeed—but gave them overcoats, hats, and scarfs to enhance the atmosphere of frigidity. Since the 1930s in Italy was the time of Mussolini, Director Maraden employed small groups of Blackshirts, who at one point prevented Tubal (Shylock's fellow moneylender) from being seated in a cafe, and at another applauded Portia for her handling of the trial. These brief, wordless moments deftly underlined the play's anti-Semitism without overwhelming the main lines of action.

By contrast with cold, brutal Venice, Portia's Belmont seemed warm and light, with lovely female attendants sketching by a pool, while Portia and Nerissa chatted under graceful Renaissance arches. Costuming remained basically in the 1930s, but used bright, warm colors and often fanciful exaggerations. The designs thus were both intelligent and imaginative, true to the text yet different from the designs of any other production of *Merchant* I have ever seen or read about.

Douglas Rain brought a quiet power to the role of Shylock. He was elegantly but darkly dressed in black chesterfield, black homburg, striped trousers, spats, and a white scarf, with only his beard to differentiate him from the other Venetians. What Rain brought to the character that I have never seen before was his development through the course of the play. His "pound of flesh" bond with Antonio was tossed off lightly as a genuine joke, not to be taken seriously. (How could it be? How could Shylock foresee that all of wealthy Antonio's ventures would founder simultaneously?) The flight of his daughter Jessica, and the reports of her frivolous behavior, destroyed his equanimity, making him thirst for revenge. Rain became wild, out of control, ready to seize on the opportunity of destroying Antonio simply because chance

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brought it his way. His behavior in the trial scene was bitter, rancorous, not forgivable yet understandable.

Susan Coyne was a lovely Portia, not your typical female star with her tall, lanky frame, handsome Roman nose, and large mouth, but also with wonderful eyes, and a beautiful smile. She had a nice sense of irony with her suitors, until the arrival of Bassanio, where it changed to a sexual electricity between the two that was compelling. The rest of the cast were generally more than competent; my only quarrel was with the performance of Roland Hewgill as Antonio, who tended to bellow his lines, which was all the more discordant because of the generally quiet intensity of the other actors, not only in *Merchant* but in all the Festival plays.

Stratford now uses a third theatre, originally named Third Stage, but recently renamed for Tom Patterson, founder of the Festival. It was a dubious way to honor that admirable gentleman. Set in a former gymnasium, it has an extremely long thrust stage, with the bulk of the audience on two sides, as at a basketball game. Sitting there, you cannot take in the whole stage at once, so that groupings and movements lose their force; the actors seem stretched out sideways in a long, boring line. On the other hand, if you sit at the end, you seem to be looking down a long alley; you are all too aware of desperate directorial manipulations to keep actors from covering one another, or facing in any one direction for too long a time. This is the open stage at its worst. The Festival is currently running a fundraising campaign to upgrade audience facilities in the main Festival Theatre; there should be another drive to replace the Patterson Theatre with something playable.

Richard Rose directed *As You Like It* in the Patterson, with sets and costumes by Charlotte Dean. She tried to overcome the limitations of the stage by using only an array of cones of descending sizes, in two rows down the long alleyway. These abstract shapes were to stand for the various locales, including Oliver's orchard, and the Forest of Arden. The idea might have worked—the Forest, in particular, is an ambiguous place that means different things to different characters in it—but the drab, beige colors of both set and costumes did not set off the actors well, while the lack of any place to sit (actors could hardly have perched on the cones) meant that, with the wretched shape of the stage, actors had to be kept in constant motion to avoid covering one another. The overall result was a restless, unfocused production, not helped by Don Horsburgh's equally random, flavorless music. Perhaps because of the unappealing environment created by the stage, set, costumes, and music, the acting was listless.

Tennessee Williams' *Sweet Bird of Youth*, directed on the same stage by Diana LeBlanc, was a far superior production, but I still would have preferred to see it in a different theatre. For two of its three acts, the play is set in a room in an elegant but decaying hotel on the Gulf Coast. Designer Astrid Janson's big, bare, awkward setting had all the elegance of a room at Motel 6. A large double bed, set improbably in the middle of the room on an angle to alleviate the awkward sightlines, seemed to

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float on a floor covering of gray indoor-outdoor carpeting, which was fully visible to the gymnasium audience sitting in tiers above it. Nevertheless, the performances of Martha Henry as the aging movie star Alexandra del Lago, and Geordie Johnson as her desperate gigolo Chance Wayne, managed to soar above the banal environment.

The background of Williams' play is that Chance, living in a town on the Gulf Coast of Mississippi, had a brief, idyllic affair with Heavenly Finley, the daughter of the political boss of the town. Being poor, he could not marry her. He went off to New York, had a brief, unsuccessful career on the stage, was drafted into the army, got out, and has since worked as a beach boy and gigolo. Now, escorting a faded movie star, he has returned to his hometown, hoping that the star will somehow provide movie careers for him and his former love. But the girl had caught a venereal disease from him, which required an operation that left her sexually sterile and mentally blank. Now her father wants to have Chance castrated as revenge. As for the movie star, she could not care less about Chance or the girl. At the end, the star leaves (it appears that her last film appearance, which she had thought a disaster, was actually a great success), while Chance stays behind, apparently acquiescing in his own castration.

Sweet Bird, written in 1959, is not considered among Williams' best. If you simply read the play, the themes of venereal disease, sterilization, and castration, the corruption and casual violence, the drugs and the liquor and the male prostitution, seem lurid and vastly overdone. In performance, however, with two good actors in the lead, the grotesqueries can become elevated in a better sense, of being mythic and poetic. Martha Henry has small features, but with her deep, resonant voice she seemed like some mythic virago, a figure out of Greek tragedy like Medea or Hecuba. Geordie Johnson (the Edmund in *Lear*), with his blond good looks, expressive eyes, and athletic body (the character spends much of the first act half naked), definitely has the physical beauty the script calls for. The role is difficult in that it has so much exposition; although the character is still young, his life is basically over when the play begins. He has long speeches about his affair with Heavenly, and his career in New York, which Johnson handled with great variety and depth. The actor is a former student of mine, whom I had not seen in some twenty years, but, as I told him afterwards, in the interim he has certainly learned how to act!

In sum, the Stratford Festival remains the best repertory company in North America. The original Stratford Shakespeare Festival, in Stratford-upon-Avon in England, founded by David Garrick in 1769, eventually gave birth to the Royal Shakespeare Company, which is certainly more adventuresome in its approach to the classics than its Canadian derivative, and more genuinely supportive of new playwriting. But the Canadian Festival, the "other" Stratford, is second to none in the world in the quality of its acting, and its depth of commitment to theatre as an art form.

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BERT CARDULLO

A Girl and Two Women

MOST OF THE BEST FILMS ABOUT CHILDREN are about boys; moreover, most of the best films about children were made by Italian neorealists, or by directors following their example. *The White Balloon*, by contrast, is about a girl and comes to us from—of all places—Iran. The essential theme of the neorealist film was the conflict in the wake of World War II between the common man and the immense societal forces that were completely external to him, yet completely determined his existence. The most pitiful victims of such forces, because the most innocent, are children, and therefore it is no accident that important neorealist films featured them. Iranian films made in the wake of the 1979 Islamic Revolution often feature them, too, but these movies have child protagonists for a different reason: to avoid the minefield of Islamic restrictions on the portrayal of adult male-female relationships. With male and female children, of course, none of these restrictions are an issue. What is an issue in the censorship-bound Iranian cinema, however, even in films featuring children, is sociopolitical criticism.

Each film must be approved both in screenplay-form and in the final cut by the Islamic government, which generously funds domestic cinema and severely restricts foreign imports. Still, just as Italian neorealist cinema treated pressing postwar problems such as unemployment, poverty, and social injustice by focusing on the stories of recognizable characters taken from daily life, Iranian films for their part manage to be cautiously or obliquely critical of government failures and social malaise in a nation whose ordinary (not necessarily extremist) people have been ravaged by politico-religious revolution, economic recession, war with Iraq, and international isolation precipitated by Iran's hostile dealings with the United States. I'm thinking particularly of Kianoush Ayari's taxi-thief film of 1993, *Abadani-Ha*, and of Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's *Nargess* (1992), made by a woman in a country not known for championing the freedom of women. Now we get *The White Balloon*, whose title itself is an oblique criticism, and which scores its delicately political points by making them in a movie about a pre-political child.

The White Balloon has a script by Abbas Kiarostami, the celebrated Iranian director of a trilogy presenting a documentary-style look at mountain life in northern Iran before and after the terrible earthquake of 1990. The director of *The White Balloon* is the young Jafar Panahi, who was Kiarostami's assistant on the last film in the trilogy, the quietly lovely *Through the Olive Trees* (1994) and here makes his first feature. Surely

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Panahi knows his film's namesake of sorts, Albert Lamorisse's *Red Balloon* (1956). At thirty-five minutes, Lamorisse's short is only about two-fifths the length of Panahi's movie and has no sociopolitical element, but it uses its red balloon in much the same way that *The White Balloon* uses a goldfish: as a symbol of shining dreams, of mysterious yearnings, and a poignant reminder of the poverty of those who no longer have them. In the case of *The Red Balloon*, the suggestion is that the adult world is poverty-stricken: weighed down so much by its cares that it cannot float along life's surface or soar up into the skies, like the little boy who adopts the red balloon as his constant companion. In the case of *The White Balloon*, there is this suggestion but there is also more, for the owner of the titular balloon is a homeless Afghan boy, a refugee from yet another war.

We see this boy at the start of Panahi's film, selling his balloons amidst a crowd in the marketplace, but we do not see him again until the end of *The White Balloon*. Attention quickly shifts from the balloon seller to a seven-year-old girl named Razieh, whom we and her mother find on a street in Teheran holding one of the Afghan's balloons. The action takes place in real time over the ninety minutes before the Persian New Year, celebrated by the feast of Nowruz, arrives at 6:30 P.M. on March 21. After the revolution that deposed the Shah, the Ayatollah Khomeini, in an attempt to elevate the importance of religious holidays, discouraged observance of this pre-Islamic New Year's festival. But Shiite Islam's gloomy commemorations of martyrdom couldn't vanquish Nowruz; despite harassment, Iranians have clung to their joyous spring holiday. So right away, *The White Balloon* sets an indirectly critical tone in what will turn out to be an almost entirely secular portrayal of Iranian daily life.

Razieh's mother has been hurrying to finish the shopping for Nowruz when we come upon her, and when she gets home to the family's apartment, she hurries to finish the cleaning as well as the cooking in time for the arrival of her in-laws. For this Persian feast, Iranians clean house, bathe carefully, and don new clothes—symbolic rituals through which they slough any lingering ills from the old year. The table is then decorated with a mirror, a candle, and white foods, for light, fire, and white are all representative of God in Zoroastrianism, the ancient Persian religion. There will be gifts to exchange, and there must also be a bowl containing a goldfish, with the goldfish representing both the mystery and joy of life. It is the humanely comic quest of Razieh for such a fish that propels the action of *The White Balloon*. Her mother keeps small goldfish in a courtyard pool, which she sells to neighbors in order to help her family make ends meet, but these aren't good enough for Razieh. She covets a marvelously plump, white-specked one that she has seen "dancing" in the window of the local pet shop.

Its cost is 100 tomans but Razieh's mother resists the girl's nagging pleas for money, since the family's budget is very tight and she can't even afford new shoes for her son, Ali. Razieh tearfully persists, however, and with the aid of her brother she finally persuades her mother to give

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her the family's last 500-toman note. And off the little girl goes with her money, a fishbowl, and the injunction that she return with 400 tomans in change. She leaves behind a harried mother who has to contend not only with her daughter's relentless entreaties, but also with her husband's distracting demands. He has been an unseen but almost ominous presence throughout the scene in the apartment: complaining from the bathroom about the lack of hot water, scolding his son for failing to buy him shampoo, screaming for a towel. Like many economically struggling Teheranis, this meter reader has a second job, which translates into little leisure time and even less patience.

None of this yet concerns Razieh, which of course is part of the point of childhood—at least early childhood, for the preteen Ali and Afghan balloon seller seem acutely aware of the exigency of their economic situation. So does the elderly snake charmer who tricks the passing Razieh into parting with her banknote before a forbidding all-male audience in an almost sunless vacant lot. He reluctantly gives it back to her in the end, but not before eliciting her tears together with her awareness of just how tenuous or provisional money is. And that awareness is further brought home to her when she arrives at the pet shop to discover not only that the price of her goldfish has been raised to 200 tomans, but also that she has somehow lost her mother's 500-toman note along the way. A kindly old woman helps Razieh to retrace her steps, and they locate the bill at the bottom of a sidewalk grating. The little girl needs assistance to retrieve it but the old woman cannot help, and neither can the pet-store owner, a neighboring tailor, or a soldier on leave.

What emerges from Razieh's contacts with these Teheranis is something more important than the resolution of her dilemma, however, and this is socioeconomic context. The elderly tailor, for example, has little time or sympathy for the girl's plight, since he is busy arguing with a disgruntled young customer of the post-revolutionary generation who threatens to use the new political system against this old-timer. The friendly soldier whom Razieh encounters on the street is a lonely conscript from the provinces who says he misses his own little sisters, and reveals that he can't go home for the New Year because he cannot afford the bus fare. Moreover, not only is this man not a Teherani after all, but neither are many of the other characters we meet in *The White Balloon*, who speak Farsi with Turkish, Polish, and thick regional accents. The filmmakers' point, I think, is to emphasize these characters' existential isolation rather than Islamic communion in the Iranian capital.

Certainly this is the case for the balloon seller, who naturally speaks Farsi with an Afghan accent and who, when he happens upon Razieh's street scene, immediately gets into a fight with her brother. Ali has been sent by his mother to find his sister but realizes they must recover the 500 tomans before returning home. Therefore he seizes the balloon seller's pole, to which is attached a pale white balloon, with the intention of sticking it down the grate and somehow pulling up the banknote. The

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fight begins because the Afghan assumes that Ali is a thief until Razieh explains the situation, after which he gladly lends both Iranian children a hand. They decide that they need something sticky to attach to one end of the pole, so Ali grabs some gum from a blind man hawking his wares on the street; all three youngsters chew it; then Ali sticks *the Afghan's* piece on the end of the pole, puts the pole down the grate, and at last pulls up the piece of paper money to his sister's delight. These two go off to purchase the goldfish, while the Afghan boy poignantly remains behind sitting atop the grate and holding his single, unsold white balloon. The camera stays on him as several minor characters reappear, and as Razieh passes through the frame with her goldfish in its bowl and her brother in tow, but without so much as a word or glance of acknowledgment directed towards the Afghan. A clock can be heard ticking, and we see a title announcing the start of the new year. As the balloon seller finally gets up to go, the frame freezes on his image and *The White Balloon* ends, its formal symmetry as well as temporal ineluctability having been sufficiently disturbed by this boy's haunting presence.

The shooting of this final scene is representative of Panahi's shooting style throughout *The White Balloon.* The film was photographed almost entirely in tight frames that mimic a child's-eye view of the world; the images are unpanoramic, with the focal point always on what is close and immediate. Thus does Panahi create the ardent intensity of childhood in a sometimes oblivious adult world—an intensity that is only increased by his habit of filming in long takes and cutting less for visual variety than to isolate Razieh even further in her own little world. The look or quality of Farzad Jowdat's cinematography is such that, despite its colors, what we remember of Razieh's unspectacular Teheran is the proximate, geometrically patterned background provided by its weathered mud bricks. If *The Red Balloon* was photographed in an old quarter of Paris in soft hues of blue and gray against which the bright red balloon shines, *The White Balloon* is shot in central Teheran in drab hues of olive and brown against which nothing shines or into which everything is absorbed.

Panahi's point is not that Razieh feels any less joy than Lamorisse's little boy at the granting of her wish, but that the lives of those around her are pervaded by a quiet desperation born of financial worry, social isolation, and political uneasiness. The bursting of the little boy's red balloon at the end of Lamorisse's film may signify his inevitable entry into the earthbound world of adulthood, but the buying of the goldfish at the end of *The White Balloon* may ironically signify something more threatening: the idea that not only every Iranian female over the age of nine lives her life in a fishbowl, but that in a sense so too does every other inhabitant of Iran. The goldfish, then, may be a symbol of the mystery and joy of life for Persians celebrating Nowruz, but in the context of this film, it becomes a symbol of the restrictiveness and subjugation of Iranian humanity as well.

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The kerchiefed little girl who plays Razieh, Aida Mohammadkhani—with her pudgy face, frequently peevish stubbornness, and only occasional gap-toothed smile—may not be any Shirley Temple in look or manner, but then this is no Shirley Temple movie. Mohammadkhani is not a programmed doll with dimples and curls, but a spontaneous human being whose unconstrained want her society will soon mechanically seek to stifle, lest it be transformed into a desire for sexual freedom. Her homely naturalness in a film that could easily have exploited another little girl's affected cuteness—from the point of view of Iranian censors, precisely because she *is* a little girl and not a young woman—seems to me not only aesthetically smart but also commercially refreshing. Western cinema, by contrast, has historically had no qualms about exploiting the cuteness, beauty, charm, seductiveness, or sensuality of *any* female in any movie. This is a subject both implicitly and explicitly addressed by the first film of the French writer-director Martine Dugowson, *Mina Tannenbaum.*

The style of this movie reminds some critics of the work of François Truffaut: several characters, one of them choric, address the camera from time to time; the camera irises out on a character at least thrice, splits the screen at least once, and employs no fewer than two stop-action shots; scenes from a character's life are replayed in a way that she would have preferred, while other scenes are altogether fantasized; a character's private thoughts on the soundtrack counterpoint her actual conversation with another person on screen; and Mina's first as well as second sightings of a handsome young man are shown in reverential slow motion. But *Mina Tannenbaum*'s subject should remind viewers of Truffaut as well, for one of his chief subjects was women (the other, children), about whom he had complex feelings. To him, women were warm, attractive, malleable objects of romance; they were also—and sometimes simultaneously—repellent, destructive, absolutist killer-castrators of men. Here, as evidence, are a few of Truffaut's titles: *The Bride Wore Black* (1968), *Mississippi Mermaid* (1969), *The Man Who Loved Women* (1977), and *The Woman Next Door* (1981). In each of these films women are seen from a man's point of view, or through the "male gaze," as Laura Mulvey would have it. Martine Dugowson naturally sees women, and men, from a female's point of view, but she knows something about the pervasive effect of the male gaze in cinema as in life, and she shows it. She also reminds us of the magnetic power of the cinematic eye—or, better, she disrupts that power—through the stylistic devices enumerated above.

Mina Tannenbaum is the story of the twenty-five-year friendship between Mina Tannenbaum and Ethel Bénégui as they grow from children in the 1960s to adults in the 1990s. Both girls are Jewish, and both are born on the same day in 1958 in a Parisian hospital. They meet in a ballet class when they are ten years old, at which age each has already been subjected to the male gaze: boys have called Mina "four eyes" on account of the glasses she must wear (one addresses the camera

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as he does so, which is Dugowson's cleverly amusing way of placing herself under masculine scrutiny); and boys have shunned the overweight Ethel at a bar mitzvah party during which they dance with every girl except her. Each of these scenes ends with the overexposure of the image to such an extent that the screen turns almost completely to white, which is an audacious attempt to suggest simultaneously the blinding nature of the male gaze and the self-negating effect it can have on the female psyche. The ballet class ends with Ethel's theft of a drawing from Mina's knapsack, then her return of it a few days later as the two girls sit on a park bench and strike up what will become a fast friendship.

Mina's drawing is a copy of a painting by Gainsborough of two girls, and it is no accident either that the girls are viewed through a man's eyes in this work or that Mina is *copying* it. In her career to come as a painter, she will support herself less through sales of her own art—which a dealer criticizes for being "too big" (too masculine?)—than by copying the paintings of great male artists like Renoir either for wide public consumption or for narrow technical study by lesser male artists. She identifies so much with Renoir's point of view as she copies him that she imagines herself as the woman in his famous painting *Dance at Bougival* (1883), dancing with the man of her dreams. One reason Mina is such a good imitator is that, perhaps unconsciously, she has assimilated both her art teacher's and her art dealer's mostly negative opinions of her original work, unrequitedly falling in love with the latter in the process as well as attracting some sexist sexual interest from the former. The teacher tells Mina, "When you can paint for eight hours and not think of yourself, maybe you'll paint something with feeling." This sounds like good advice, since it appears to argue for a denial of narcissistic subjectivity in favor of devotion to the art object. However, a total denial of self for the sake of one's painting is to deny life or feeling to the pictures as well. Thus the instructor's advice comes to seem more like an exhortation to Mina to deny her *female* self and serve instead a male conception of art, which is to say merely to become a copyist or imitator of artworks fervently produced by men. Ironically, the artist Serge, the last man with whom Mina will live, paints in her shadow until he begins passing off her unique style and colors as his own.

If I appear to be concentrating more on Mina Tannenbaum than Ethel Bénégui in this review, that is because the film does so both by announcing its primary subject through its title and then by making Mina's character carry the dramatic weight of the narrative. The lives of these two female figures parallel each other somewhat, but they also diverge, and the more they do so the more Mina's tale advances in importance while Ethel's recedes. Even as they hint of divergence, the parallels between the women are instructive yet witty, compelling yet modulated. Their mothers, for instance: Mina's, a concentration-camp survivor, severely forbids her daughter's young German acquaintances to enter their home in the Paris of the 1970s; while Ethel's mother, even

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on her deathbed, comically continues to plague her daughter about finding a Jewish husband. But the film in no way paints Mina and Ethel as either targets of anti-Semitism or illustrations of Jewish intellectual superiority. To wit: in Ethel's fantasy of herself as a Jewish Bardot, it is Mina in disguise as a *rabbi* who attempts to rape her! The stern Mina will grow into an intense, "rabbinical" artist, even if she does shed her brainy glasses along the way, whereas the scatterbrained Ethel will become a svelte and flirty journalist. Nonetheless, that does not keep them from reading the same material: for example, Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, whose setting in the France of 1830 is drolly intended by Dugowson to clash with the setting in which Mina and Ethel read the book. They do so in the France of 1974, after a circular camera movement used to indicate not only the passage of time but also the true nature of the 1968 student "revolution."

As Mina and Ethel begin to achieve success with men, each also tellingly begins to fantasize that she is a movie star. The star with whom Mina identifies is Bette Davis, whose screen image—as a willful, liberated woman who managed to remain spitefully independent in a world dominated by men—we see depicted in two clips. The star with whom Ethel identifies, by contrast, is Rita Hayworth, whom we twice see singing in *Gilda* (1946), the film that more than any other confirmed her position in the 1940s as the "Love Goddess" of Hollywood. According to male-gaze theory, Davis is a "disturbing," "guilty" woman who must be voyeuristically investigated and then punished or saved, whereas Hayworth is an icon of pleasure whose beauty men desire fetishistically to ravish. Over the years, Ethel transforms herself into such an erotic object through make-up, fasting, and hair-coloring, and she uses her looks not only to get ahead in the high-pressure world of arts journalism, but also to compete with Mina for men.

When we see her toward the end, Ethel is living with and perhaps married to Gérard, the last in a series of Christian boyfriends for this Jewish woman. She has had a child by him whom she has named Mina, yet she can't seem to find time anymore for her friend of the same name, who lives without a man. Mina has continued to paint but, due to facial disfigurement caused by a car accident, she now attracts only indifference or hostility from masculine eyes. After Ethel cancels a lunch date with her in order to go skiing with Gérard, Mina blacks out a picture she has been painting, swallows a handful of sleeping pills, then crawls into the fetal position to die on the floor of her studio. After her funeral and the news that, as a result of Mina's death, her paintings have become hot items for the first time, we are left with an epigraph from Kafka's "Investigations of a Dog." In it a dog, like the more famous "hunger artist" of Kafka's story written in the same year (1922), resolved as one of his "scientific experiments" to "fast completely as long as [he] could stand it, and at the same time avoid all sight of food, all temptation." If "A Hunger Artist" is conventionally interpreted as an allegory of the artist's role in a modern society increasingly devoid of

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spiritual hunger or inner life, then *Mina Tannenbaum* can be interpreted as a film about the female artist's role in such a society. Except that, through Kafka's epigraph, she tragicomically metamorphoses into a bitch who, despite her yearnings to the contrary, exists solely for man's companionate consumption in a world so remote from God that the only hunger is for goods and services, the only art is the kind you can sell, and the only life is that of the flesh.

I trust that I haven't made *Mina Tannenbaum* seem like a dour piece of textbook feminism or victim-art, for it is no such didactic thing. The film has wit, style, and above all intelligence, and it treats its male characters just as fairly as its female ones. Part of the movie's quality, as one might guess, derives from the performances of its two leading roles—the adult version of those roles, that is, since two sets of children play Mina and Ethel, first at the age of five and then at ten. Romane Bohringer, who in 1992 had the title role in *The Accompanist* (directed by Truffaut-protégé Claude Miller), is Mina Tannenbaum, and she is extraordinary in her ability to suggest the frequently unspoken depths of her character's agony and isolation. Elsa Zylberstein, as Ethel Bénégui, is equally good but quite the opposite of Bohringer in her ability to play the extroverted character of Ethel where she lives: on the surface. I'm not sure which approach to acting is harder to carry out: the more internal and implicative kind, or the more external and expressive one. Perhaps the question doesn't really matter, since the acting style should fit the character one is playing—something often forgotten in the theatre. By analogy, the cinematic style should fit the story one is filming, and Dominique Chapuis's cool, crisp color photography does so by creating just the right soberly contemplative mood to juxtapose against the jaunty spirit of Martine Barraqué and Dominique Gallieni's accomplished, dualistic editing. All of them women, and all working toward a common good.

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DEAN FLOWER

Three Novels and Fifty-Three Short Stories

AMONG RECENT NOVELISTS THESE DAYS I find many a poor player who struts and frets his hour upon the stage. Few seem likely to make a lasting impression. Long novels by such interesting writers as Louise Erdrich (*Tales of Burning Love*), Albert Murray (*The Seven League Boots*), Robert Coover (*John's Wife*), and Doris Lessing (*Love, Again*) turn out to be woefully short on inspiration. Notorious novels like *Primary Colors* prove to be shallow beyond belief, unworthy even of ridicule. Novels that should have been witty and entertaining, like A. N. Wilson's *Hearing Voices*, bog down in labored mechanism and unconvincing chat. It would be a dry season indeed if it were not for an exile from Antigua, a former schoolteacher from the Dublin slums, and a failed presidential candidate from Peru.

Jamaica Kincaid began writing short, lyrical coming-of-age novels in 1983, using the form to expose the abuses of racism and misogyny in the Caribbean and wherever else her fugitives of imperialism find themselves. Correcting for the political stridency of *Lucy* (1991) but not yielding any of its austerity, her latest work may well be her best.[1] Kincaid's narrators always sound autobiographical, first-person intimate. If they are not the author herself, they sound like her virtual selves, so spiritually close as to seem beyond criticism—*Annie John* (1985) is perhaps the most conspicuous example. But by now it has become clear that autobiography is for Kincaid a rhetoric or strategy more than a genre. Her title this time out emphasizes the point. Xuela Richardson writes the "autobiography" of her Carib mother, who died in giving birth to her, by searching her own life story for the woman she never knew: "In me is the voice I never heard, the face I never saw, the being I came from . . . , the person I did not allow myself to become." Much of the novel is the limning of that emptiness, figured for the daughter in a self-administered abortion that sterilizes her womb.

None of it would be effective, however, if Xuela were not so detached, so certain of her own feelings and clinical about her enemies, so guiltless and unsentimental. No cries for help taint her story. To begin with she remembers being dumped by her father, along with his dirty clothes, at

[1] THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MY MOTHER, by *Jamaica Kincaid.* Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $20.00.

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the home of his laundress. He is African-Scottish by birth, a policeman well-known on the island of Dominica for his treachery, profiteering, and vanity. Later Xuela endures living with him and his new wife, who despises her. Then she is sent "inevitably" to the LaBattes, to become a silent companion for madame, and a sexual servant for monsieur. It was another of her father's business deals. Still later Xuela lives with an English couple, a doctor and his snobbish wife, turning the white man into her sexual slave and marrying him when his wife dies. Meanwhile there is Roland the roguish dockworker, whom she adores sexually, shrugging off the curses of Roland's wife. The real story lies not in these grim or outrageous events but in the way Xuela's monologue conveys her self—her matter-of-fact anger, her defiance and pride, her frank sexuality. It is a novel not of scenes and dialogue, but of assertions, the self-assertions without which she would not matter to anyone. She throws up her defenses, declares her separate reality, refuses to be invaded and dominated. "No one observed and beheld me, I observed and beheld myself; the invisible current went out and it came back to me. I came to love myself in defiance, out of despair, because there was nothing else." Similarly, her decision to marry involves neither hope nor desire for love from anyone else: "it allowed me to think of all my deeds and of myself with kindness in the deep dark of night, when sometimes it was necessary for me to do so." There is as much sadness as resentment in these austere formulations. At the end of the novel Xuela claims for herself a deeper triumph behind all her losses and defeats: "for me the future must remain capable of casting a light on the past such that in my defeat lies the seed of my great victory, in my defeat lies the beginning of my great revenge." Xuela is Kincaid's most complex character yet, a woman whose brief life resonates with rejection and loss, but one who refuses to surrender the idea that *she* matters, even if that comes at the expense of all forgiveness, compassion, maternity, and love.

Roddy Doyle's latest novel, an equally grim monologue of a woman's suffering, has similar depths without being nearly so cheerless.[2] Where Xuela's voice holds everyone at a distance, the narrator of Doyle's novel—a thirty-nine-year-old mother—is a compendium of remembered voices, scenes, and expressive details. In fact Paula Spencer's vulnerability to others—the very generosity that abets her husband Charlo's abusiveness—makes her a natural storyteller. Hearing of Charlo's death in the first few lines of the novel, Paula remembers not her own emotion but the look of the *garda* ("only a young fella, skinny and with raw spots all over his neck") and the sound of his voice ("—Missis Spencer?"). Readers of Doyle's earlier novels like *The Snapper* and *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* will recognize at once the author's gift for conveying the helter-skelter intimacy of Dublin's poorer families, their embattled loyalties and abrasive slang, their pride and misery, their long memories

[2] THE WOMAN WHO WALKED INTO DOORS, by *Roddy Doyle.* Viking. $22.95.

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for anecdote and grievance. Paula is still the center of her family, despite the abuses of Charlo, despite her drinking and depression, despite being cast since adolescence as a slut.

A disordered documentary of sorts, the novel consists of Paula's account of herself as if it were dictated, fitfully, into a tape recorder. Memories remote and recent, facts too painful to admit, and a few consolations too deep for tears, jerk her this way and that. The first hundred and fifty pages tell of Charlo's death, her wretched schooling, her three beloved children, her early sexual coming-of-age, her present routines as charwoman and mother, her first infatuation with Charlo, their marriage and honeymoon, her throwing him out after sixteen years, her continuing love for him, the television coverage of his death, her various erotic fantasies, her nightly struggles with the bottle. Doyle craftily allows the fragmentary structure to conceal or delay what Paula still has trouble admitting, still would deny, and acknowledges only in the last fifty pages: the history of Charlo's brutality—written on her body in bruises, burns, bloody beatings, broken bones. Nobody asked any questions, even after endless trips to the hospital. She was merely accident prone, "the woman who walked into doors." Charlo is worse than any evil that Kincaid's novel serves up, because Charlo is inscrutable: he is not the symptom of a corrupt system, not cruel by reason of gender or class, but rather horrible and full of hate because he just is. Doyle is canny about this. He makes his narrator sensitive, honest and affectionate, however lacking in the self-esteem that might have protected her; but he also makes her smart. She is clearly far more intelligent than anyone in her world has ever discerned, and she has no explanation for Charlo's perversity. If she has none, why should the novel offer anything else? At a climactic moment Paula sees only the pitiless gaze of her husband turned toward Nicola, his sixteen-year-old daughter, and she knows at last what to do about him. I read the novel twice, with great pleasure each time, not because of its grimness—which is certainly convincing enough—but because of the rich expressiveness of Paula Spencer's voice, its range of tones and its rich inclusiveness. It reminds me of the best monologues in Brian Friel's *The Faith Healer* and *Molly Sweeney*, of the polyphonal voices in Sean O'Faolain's or Edna O'Brien's best stories, and even some of the bleaker retrospectives in Beckett and Joyce.

The other canny novel not to be missed is Mario Vargas Llosa's latest.[3] Reviewers have found it "confusingly disorganized" (Madison Smartt Bell) and "rich fare, hastily and confusingly served" (John Updike), but so are *Nostromo* and *Absalom, Absalom.* Vargas Llosa's project in *Death in the Andes* is to investigate—once more—the complex identity of his native land. That is not to be found in modern Spanish-speaking Lima but among the mountain people, the Quechua-speaking *serruchos*, where

[3] DEATH IN THE ANDES, by *Mario Vargas Llosa.* Trans. by *Edith Grossman.* Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $24.00.

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in fact Vargas Llosa was born. It is likewise not to be found in scenic realism or linear plotting but in the telling of stories, and in the interweaving of them, each one an invention or re-construction of Peruvian reality. Looked at this way the novel is not nearly so baffling as the spiritual and political forces that define the country. Its central narrator is the rather stolid Corporal Lituma, who has appeared in four other Vargas Llosa novels, most recently *Who Killed Palomino Molero?* (1987). Lituma's lack of imagination and weary reluctance to carry out his Guardia Civil duties in a remote Andean village—investigate three disappearances—helps Vargas Llosa to dramatize the novel's deeper mysteries. Lituma spends much of his time listening to his youthful adjutant, Tomás Carreño, tell the prolonged story of his devotion to a prostitute. Framing and dissolving, shifting background to foreground, first-person to third and past to present, Vargas Llosa is at his inventive best in this story, translated notably well by Edith Grossman. Carreño's naive adventures with a woman who never loves him become much more compelling than Lituma's skeptical, sexist commentaries on it.

Cut into that structure are several sequences of terrorist brutality, slayings carried out with a blind and mindless indifference by the guerillas of "the Shining Path," told from the points of view of the victims, including innocent tourists, naive environmentalists, even a herd of tamed *vicuñas.* Again the point seems to lie in whose narrative governs the landscape. For the *terrucos* it is simply a Maoist fable: "This is war, and you are a lackey of our class enemy," as one of them says. Anyone not on the Shining Path becomes the enemy. But tourists and environmentalists have their own stories, their own ways of "reading" the landscape. And the mountain people, as Lituma is forced to recognize, believe in a deeper authority, signalled by violent storms and landslides. For them the landscape is controlled by primordial spirits, deities known through myth and fable, who reject the encroachments of civilization and can be appeased only through ritual and sacrifice. Vargas Llosa suggests, as he did more benignly in *The Storyteller* (1989), that the most subversive power lies in the one who can manipulate these tribal myths. This turns out to be Dionisio and his wife, Doña Adriana, who run the local bar in Naccos and who inscribe native stories with their own crude parodies of Dionysian rite. Vargas Llosa leaves the reader with a deep sense that reality in Peru is dictated by story, by intertwined and yet competing fables that are at once ancient and modern, naive as well as corrupt, but no less coercive for all that. Critics are fond of paralleling Faulkner and Vargas Llosa as devious and involuted storytellers, but the better parallel now seems to me with Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony,* where the fundamental issue is the same: whose fables will dictate the spiritual as well as the political reality of the land?

If it was generally a dry season for novels, it was a wet one for short

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stories. Evan S. Connell's *Collected Stories*[4] totals fifty-six, including no less than twelve written since 1991; he continues to satirize Midwestern stereotypes and California screwballs in long riffs of effortless-seeming dialogue. W. D. Wetherell issued an impressive fourth collection of stories,[5] the best of which are about parents and grief. And Starling Lawrence's stories are especially appealing for their moments of luminous intimacy, generated in the most understated language.[6] But the best of such collections are more than collections: they group themselves into sequences and relationships the way a fine book of poems does, suggesting a larger, more meaningful design than any story taken alone can represent. No less than four such collections appeared this season and are worthy of particular attention.

Lester Goran's *Tales from the Irish Club* is a perfect example of the genre.[7] It even comes with an introduction, explaining that these stories chronicle an era of social history, that of an Irish-Catholic community in Pittsburgh which came to an end in 1965, a time "as gone now as the Weimar Republic." Goran admits ruefully that his characters are so unimportant that "nobody but a fiction writer would want to perpetuate" them; they were "auditioning to be misplaced by history." But of course tones like that guarantee the book's success. Exactly because of its limitations—one thinks of J. F. Powers's curates and pastors, Grace Paley's *Little Disturbances of Man*, Gloria Naylor's Brewster Place—the stories echo and reinforce each other. The first story begins, "It was to young Farley's credit that he could fit in anywhere, but as his mother confided to Mrs. Condon one night in 1954, it was no great accomplishment because he never fit in anyplace anybody much would want to belong." The colloquial energy here is typical. These are mainly bruising, ironic experiences, about women driven into miserable spinsterhood, about men sexually obsessed, about people forever at odds with one another, men against women, misfits of both sexes against the group. Just as often however the stories end with some gesture of recovery and enclosure in the little world of the Irish Club. "The world would be a better place if people looked into their Old Testament once a week instead of watching Milton Berle for the truth," says Pal Mahoney at the end of Goran's last story. Someone says, "Pal, you should have been a Jew." "I'd be honored," Pal says. "Up to a point, you understand." The jauntiness of such talk runs throughout the collection, but so too does a more painful syntax of unappeasable regret. At the end of "The Last Visit" the protagonist leaves the Club, wishing "his father would come tonight and tear up the victory that now lay on him and with it its

[4] THE COLLECTED STORIES, by *Evan S. Connell.* Counterpoint. $30.00.

[5] WHEREVER THAT GREAT HEART MAY BE, by *W. D. Wetherell.* University Press of New England. $21.95.

[6] LEGACIES, by *Starling Lawrence.* Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $22.00.

[7] TALES FROM THE IRISH CLUB, by *Lester Goran.* The Kent State University Press. $12.00p.

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shadows on the wall, dismantle it to pieces, so the boy could sleep like angels in a place absent of harm." Or at the end of "Mortality" an aggrieved wife who wants to outlive her mate concludes, "Here the two of them were, old, getting feeble, and a person not able to tell what was coming to them or anyone else by word, deed, weather, or numbers, only that everyone died eventually, and what was the sense in that?" Goran's ear for such rhythms as these is flawless. On that basis alone his book should survive.

Although Goran has also written seven novels and a memoir, he remains largely unknown. Andre Dubus presents a very different case.[8] His latest collection of stories comes wrapped in praise of the most lavish sort from Elmore Leonard, Tobias Wolff, and Kurt Vonnegut. He has won prizes and fellowships, including the MacArthur. The heir-apparent of Hemingway, Dubus has a reputation for clean declarative sentences, purity of line, and—unlike his master—a direct approach to feelings. Dubus's favorite male characters tend to be middle-aged veterans who are wounded but large-hearted, susceptible to great rushes of emotion, honest about expressing them, willing to shed tears. *Dancing After Hours* contains a larger number of these wounded men—limping, cane-braced, wheel-chaired, broken-legged—reflecting the fact that some years ago Dubus himself was crippled by a near-fatal automobile accident. One story begins, "The retired marine colonel had two broken legs, both in casts from the soles of his feet to the tops of his thighs." Predictably, the story concerns this immobilized man's fear that his wife is having an affair. Whether physical or not, wounding for Dubus always reflects a man's confusion of love and carnality. Here is a typical moment, from "The Lover":

> In the arms of his passionate wife he felt a communion he believed was the supreme earthly joy. It had ended and he had found it again with other wives and other women, and always its ending had flung him into a dark pit of finitude, whose walls seeped despair as palpable as the rain he walked in now, after too many years.

As if to counter the virility issue, Dubus makes a concerted effort in these fourteen new stories (some of them mere sketches) to focus on women: a happily-married woman who comes within inches of committing adultery, a woman who takes a teenage boy for a lover and persuades him to kill her husband, a woman whose story consists of the moment she becomes a widow. But here Dubus's limitations emerge. There is a gap between the plausible, smoothly rendered surfaces of things and the crudity of his fundamental conceptions. "Out of the Snow," for example, tells of a happily married suburban woman who is about to be raped in her kitchen by two scruffy intruders. *No, God; not like this,* she prays. Then

[8] DANCING AFTER HOURS, by *Andre Dubus.* Alfred A. Knopf. $23.00.

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she kicks one attacker in the groin, throws a kettle at the other, and batters them both with a skillet. The story fairly glows with approval, cherishing every moment but particularly the last where she tells her husband she did it not for him or the children but for herself. And that scares her: She says, "there's a place deep in our hearts that knows how to look at [evil], and beat it till it's broken and bleeding, till it crawls away." Wouldn't it be pretty to think so? Dubus has a fatal tendency, in this story and others, to oversimplify. He tries to cherish every moment as if it were sacred, ceremonial and portentous. He wants ultimately to forgive and reassure his characters, and that verges on sentimentality.

The two best collections of stories I've seen lately are both strong where Dubus is weak. Edward Falco uses violence in story after story, not to reassure but to bring his characters to their senses—or to a disturbing impasse.[9] One character keeps a chunk of petrified wood that his father "damn near killed me with" and it becomes a reminder of the sort of anger he hates, the sort of rage and violence he discovers in himself. Another remembers beating a woman after sex one time when he was drunk and on drugs, and that helps him decide what not to do twenty years later. Nobody's conscience is clear in Falco's stories, nor is the violence limited to memories. Desperate for money, an American youth in London decides to go ahead with a drug smuggling deal, swallowing a condom full of cocaine that is supposed to remain intact until he reaches his destination and takes a laxative. Desperate for sex, a college boy sleeps with his professor; when her husband commits suicide, she makes the boy shoot her aging, mortally ill dog. Most of Falco's stories have prosaic settings—two couples on vacation at Cape Flattery, three kids who need some escape from squabbling families—into which some insanity erupts, a lawless impulse, a manic intruder, a stranger with some powerful claim or temptation. The result is often nightmarish or surreal, as in "The Artist," where the quiet sanctity of a Long Island suburb is exchanged for a wild apocalypse in Manhattan—sirens, bullets, shattered glass, and five dead bodies. More often, however, Falco finds his surrealism in the ordinary look of things. Here is a younger brother looking at his sixteen-year-old sister:

> Julie's hair was bright red and shaved at the temples, short over the top, and long in the back, where it was dyed blond. She wore a gigantic crucifix dangling from her right ear, and a "Jesus is My Friend" T-shirt that was too small on her: it left a few inches of her stomach bare and her nipples struggling for freedom. Her pants, she had slashed with a razor from top to bottom, so from where I stood I could see she was wearing neon pink panties.

[9] ACID, by *Edward Falco.* University of Notre Dame Press. $25.00; $14.95.

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In images like these Falco sees how people are dangerous, both to themselves and to others. He is clearly a writer to be reckoned with.

Equally good if not better is Roxana Robinson in her second collection of stories.[10] She too is interested in irruptions of violence, or the threat of them, and the havoc that plays in the imaginations of parents and spouses. In "Halloween," a story paradigmatic of her theme, a woman whose daughter has gone trick-or-treating opens her front door to a face painted densely white on one side, shiny black on the other. Tonelessly an inscrutable young man refuses her proffered treats, and asks to use the telephone. The rest of the story builds on the woman's recognition that *anything* might happen. Every relationship in Robinson's world is precarious. In "Asking for Love," a recently-divorced mother finds herself in love with John, a conventional man, someone safe whom she has known all her life. But she needs to bridge the distance between herself and Melissa, her surly teenage daughter who still blames her for the divorce. Neither relationship is developing well. When Melissa "accidentally" locks her out after a date one night, the woman turns to John for a boost to her back porch. In the stumbling confusion, he teeters—"I could feel that this was too much for him, and he was giving way, giving up"—while Melissa appears on the porch above, hissing, "What are you doing out there, *Mother*?" The word is clearly a curse. The scene would be funny if it were not so awful. She is not alone among Robinson characters who find no reassurance, no loving support, no matter what they risk. There are several stories here that hinge on quiet agonies: one of them concludes that when you hear gentleness in someone's voice, it "is what you are offered when there is nothing else left" and you know "the worst has come." Nevertheless Robinson can handle much more bizarre scenarios brilliantly too, like the predicament of the wife in "Slipping Away" who is trying to meet her lover for lunch while her husband may be listening to her furtive phone calls, faking noisy departures, and hiding in closets to spy on her. Heightening the frenzy is Lita, the housekeeper, who offers unreliable scouting reports on the husband's whereabouts, in Spanish. Imagining several different disasters at the end, helpless to control any of them, the narrator realizes "Oh, God . . . anything could happen, now, anything at all." Which in a dim way was what she wanted all along: "It was alarming, [she admits,] but it was also thrilling." Fine stories like these and Falco's—stories that interweave and build on one another—are worth any number of those long, uninspired novels of the season.

[10] ASKING FOR LOVE, by *Roxana Robinson*. Random House. $23.00.

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ROBERT McDOWELL

The Writer's Life: Recovering Perspective

LITERARY CRITICISM IN OUR TIME IS WOUNDED BY PUFFERY. It is damaged by a certain kind of critic, a plodding mechanic, who applies his or her opinions like a novice laborer pouring on too much cement. How many contemporary writers injure or destroy their talents, wrenching their stories and songs to please critics and competition judges who reward those who have made artistic (and personal) compromises similar to their own? From Nobel laureates to promising newcomers, the work of more of our writers than one would care to count is diluted by flattery, fear of giving offense, and subservience to critical theories that tell us more about the agendas and limitations of the critic than about the art itself. The situation says something grim about the lack of courage and integrity in all concerned.

Writing, the writing *game*, is small compared to other endeavors. Success, fame and fortune come more easily—and in greater denominations—in any other profession and in almost all the other arts. Yet literary writing is an American endeavor with a difference (so many enter the game convinced they are somehow *different* from others). Thus convinced and already conditioned by the influence of our confused, disposable culture, such writers skip over the issue of success and go right after the fame (small, but influential), and fortune (job security, usually in the form of tenure, prizes, grants, and fellowships). Usually when writers of serious literature talk about their successes, they now discuss what they have acquired in terms of fame and fortune, and almost never talk about their poems, novels, plays, stories, or essays. In countless situations at writing conferences, workshops, and readings, I have marveled at what seems a tacit unspoken agreement between participants that the question of quality in the writing will never come up. If it does, others move quickly to isolate the offender, restoring order to the occasion. In fact, what is restored is an insipid gentility that allows everyone to shine despite the mediocrity of their writing.

So it is a relief to encounter a book of essays, the modestly titled *One Writer's Reality*, that by its lucidity and integrity refutes the little world just described.[1] Its author, Monroe K. Spears, was born in 1916 to a music teacher who loved poetry, and a farmer turned lawyer. Raised on his

[1] ONE WRITER'S REALITY, by *Monroe K. Spears*. University of Missouri Press. $29.95.

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grandmother's firsthand accounts of the Civil War, old enough to remember the Depression, Spears notes that "with these genetic components, it was obvious that I would have to be (if not a lawyer, like my father . . .) some combination of teacher and writer." When Spears was twelve, his father's death was followed quickly by the stock market crash. These twin disasters left him "yearning for stability, order, tradition." He found what he was looking for at the University of South Carolina in the eighteenth-century literature course taught by Joseph Edwards Norwood, and he was so enthralled that he made this subject his own specialty. The discipline that was required introduced him to the complexity of editing texts and grasping the elusive intention of the author, abilities one surely detects in the teaching, editing and criticism to follow.

After four years in the army, Spears returned to the United States in 1946. He taught at Vanderbilt University, where he encountered the New Criticism and eventually became "a pragmatic convert." From our vantage point, universities of that era seem to have enjoyed a golden age. Many students were veterans. They were older and more experienced than students before the war, and they brought to their studies an unusual urgency and commitment to learning. They were keenly aware of the need to make up for lost time. If good students fuel good teachers, then returning professors like Spears were blessed. His students included many gifted writers, Madison Jones and James Dickey among them.

In addition to teaching, Spears became editor of *The Sewanee Review*, succeeding John Palmer in 1952 and serving until 1961. Spears preserved the integrity of the magazine as established by Palmer and Allen Tate, but he also expanded its focus by publishing notable essayists like Lionel Trilling and Philip Wheelwright. Spears made another significant contribution as editor, beginning the practice of giving fellowships to younger writers, including Jones and Dickey, George Garrett, and Louis Rubin, among many others.

Meanwhile, he continued to write and publish important texts. A short list includes *Poetry of W.H. Auden: The Disenchanted Island, Dionysus and the City: Modernism in Twentieth-Century Poetry*, and (after he had retired from teaching) *American Ambitions* and *Countries of the Mind.* In the closing essay in *One Writer's Reality*, Spears concludes that his criticism "has never been exclusively literary, but also cultural in the sense that I have seen literature in historical, moral, and philosophical contexts . . . I have tried to be a responsible interpreter of literature . . . not detached in any aesthetic otherworld." How refreshing! Spears's accessible, supple prose style reminds us of criticism's highest goals. In an age in which our most visible poetry critic claims, for example, that she cannot see the value of dramatic monologue in verse, it means everything to be able to turn from such a limited point of view to a generous and brilliant alternative. Always available to the general reader, meticulous in analysis, broad-minded and measured in his views,

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Spears sets an impressive example for all writers and critics. This is what a life in letters should be.

The landscape of Spears's new, concentrated volume of nine essays is set up "so as to consider reality from the largest scale in 'cosmology' to the smallest and most personal scale . . ." (the occasion in 1993 of the author's induction into the South Carolina Academy of Authors). The volume includes two essays on *The Sewanee Review* and the phenomenal community of writers centered at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee; appreciative assessments of W. H. Auden, James Dickey, and Anthony Hecht; a consideration of passion and the supernatural as treated by the novelist Reynolds Price; a compelling piece on the ever-elusive relationship between music and poetry as seen through Schubert and Keats; and a personal memoir on writing. The most ambitious essays are three: "Writing as a Vocation," "Cosmology and the Writer," and "Schubert, Keats, and the True Voice of Feeling."

In the first of these, Spears reminds us of several things we are better off not forgetting. He sums up general assumptions about writers in America (". . . the tendency is to assume, in the United States, that he doesn't have any [vocation] . . ."; "Writing as a profession . . . is possible in the United States only for a very few very lucky individuals . . ."), and takes his stand against our period's weak standards: "My attitude has also been affected by the increasing psychobabble over the years about 'creativity,' which assumes that everyone is creative and values equally all attempts at self-expression, from finger-painting and macramé to poetry." Spears's use of statistics is intriguing. According to *Statistical Abstracts* from 1989, there were eighty-two thousand "authors" in the United States, up from sixty-two thousand in 1969. This significant increase in a relatively short period of time suggests that we are experiencing yet another effect of a current delusion, a cultural condition in which one believes one may become anything one wants simply by declaring it so. Even so, Spears refutes Lewis Simpson's pessimistic view that "the man of letters has become obsolete." He also writes wisely about America's creative writing industry. The most important argument Spears puts forth on this subject concerns the separation of creative writing and English departments. His opposition to this development is unequivocal and convincing: "Segregation of creative writing from the critical-historical study of literature makes academic study dull and trivial, and the creative writer self-absorbed, self-indulgent, and ignorant." Acknowledging the differences between the needs of writers and academics, Spears constructs a measured, convincing call for integration rather than segregation of the departments. And here, as elsewhere, Spears ably conveys what is most important to the writer at peace with his calling: "To sum up, I have been concerned with serious writing, with aims beyond money or transient celebrity . . . the act of writing can be an aid to contemplation, can enhance perceptiveness and free the imagination, can increase awareness; and through all this enable the writer to

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be more alive." What point of view could be more positive, more accurate?

In the second of the three essays singled out above, "Cosmology and the Writer," Spears considers the vast implications of current science and how the knowledgeable writer may make use of them. Some writers today make fashionable references to science. The trouble is that many have only a passing acquaintance with the subject, a thin relationship based on having read some articles, perhaps, or one of the many popular books on wave particle theory, the anthropic principle, black holes and the like. Few are successful at actually integrating a scientific theory and imaginative literary vision. The poet and essayist Frederick Turner comes to mind, and Spears offers as examples William Butler Yeats ("the only poet whose use of astrology has been really effective . . . because he believed in it deeply"), James Dickey (whom Spears usefully discusses as a visionary poet), and the first and greatest poet of cosmology, Lucretius. He notes the early modernist literary aversion to science (Baudelaire, Flaubert), and suspects that most writers today still harbor "a lingering suspicion, hostility, or at best indifference toward science." Spears is not among them. Though insisting that he is "neither a scientist nor a science and technology groupie . . . but an intermittent student of the history and philosophy of science," he has read deeply in, and meditated on this vast, ever-fluctuating field. Examining how writers think about cosmology, and how they use it in their work, Spears draws on far more than a passing knowledge of the theories of Stephen Hawking, Carl Sagan, Alexander Friedman, Albert Einstein, Freeman Dyson, and James S. Trefil, among others. He correctly points out that contemporary authors' use of cosmology descends from the elaborate cosmologies constructed by Dante and Milton. Citing examples from the poetry of William Empson, Archibald MacLeish, e.e. cummings, and others, Spears reminds us of the long reach these two giants still extend over our imaginations.

Spears also debunks fringe science such as UFOs and the popular argument (with its large implications) that the human brain is simply a computer, while appreciating the best science fiction (Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*) and the "workable" science found in novelists such as Thomas Pynchon and Michael Crichton. In the end, he advocates the point of view of "humane scientists" such as Trefil and Robert T. Rood (in one passage Spears focuses on Trefil's claim "that everything we have learned about life in the past twenty years shows that we are unique . . ."). In Spears's view, then, the new cosmology will, at best, expand the consciousness of the contemporary author, helping the aspiring writer in his central enterprise of exploring what it is to be human and defining the boundaries of our unique domain.

The third essay of special interest, "Schubert, Keats, and the True Voice of Feeling," may be the most compelling piece in the book; it speaks volumes to the working poet and musician. That Spears selects two great artists badly neglected in their own lives, and writes about both

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with great insight, sensitivity, and compassion reveals something significant about the essayist's own character. Spears rises to the occasion in his opening paragraphs, addressing our age's fuzzy thinking about the relationship between music and poetry. He cites suggestive historical analogies between Beethoven and Eliot, Pope and Mozart, Berlioz and Byron, Debussy and Mallarmé, but warns that "to go beyond large generalizations is difficult and of doubtful value." In other words, connections between the works of certain composers and poets are apparent to the interested observer, though these connections are of marginal value to those who seek a prescriptive argument in the composition of music or poetry. Through Schubert and Keats, Spears discusses Romanticism, "but without the characteristics that have given Romanticism a bad name." This composer and poet "express sentiment without the least trace of sentimentality" and "emotions without self-consciousness or embarrassment." Devotion to their art, and the modesty of both men impress Spears, and it is not difficult to imagine that he is most drawn to these qualities in contemporary artists as well. Spears is also fascinated by the fact that both men, dying young, composed their greatest works while terminally ill. Thus inspired, Spears constructs an interesting meditation on the relationship between disease and art. In writing well about both men, Spears responds to a special sense of kinship. For this reader, he has revitalized a long-waning interest in Schubert, and for that I am particularly grateful. In this book, as in many others throughout a long, distinguished career, Monroe K. Spears articulates a point of view that continues to teach us things we need to know, and reminds us of subtle values we often forget.

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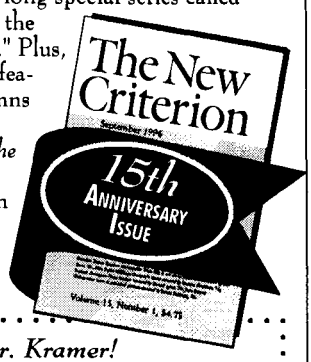

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JAMES SEATON

Ellison the Essayist

IF THIS COLLECTION RECEIVES THE ATTENTION IT DESERVES, Ralph Ellison will no longer be remembered simply as the author of *Invisible Man* but also as one of the great American essayists.[1] The evidence, indeed, has been there for some time (the previously published collections, *Shadow and Act* and *Going to the Territory*, were published in 1964 and 1986, respectively), but so far speculation about the potential of Ellison the novelist—when *would* he publish that second novel?—has diverted attention from the realized achievements of Ellison the essayist. Although the best essays in *Shadow and Act* and *Going to the Territory*, both included in their entirety, are also the high points of the present collection, John Callahan has performed a real service in selecting the previously uncollected and sometimes unpublished essays, addresses, and interviews that together add up to roughly one-third of *The Collected Essays*. Previously published but uncollected essays like "Flamenco," "James Armistead Lafayette," "Presentation to Bernard Malamud," as well as unpublished works like the 1972 Commencement Address at William and Mary, the 1969 "Haverford Statement," the 1990 "Notes" for a talk at Columbia, and the 1992 "Address at the Whiting Foundation" are especially welcome additions to Ellison's canon because they expand and develop insights adumbrated in the already collected essays.

"Secessionism," for example, appears in "Perspective of Literature," the last essay in *Going to the Territory*, only as a characterization of the attitudes of "the heroes of Ernest Hemingway." In "Haverford Statement," however, Ellison applies the concept to contemporary society, arguing that "black separatism" is "really another version of secessionism, an old American illusion. . . ." While praising Bernard Malamud, Ellison takes the idea one step further, observing that "we are all at some point or another secessionists" ("Presentation to Bernard Malamud"). A thought that at first seems a wonderfully effective criticism of extremists now becomes a basis for self-criticism. Finally, the idea recurs unexpectedly in Ellison's 1990 "Notes for Class Day Talk at Columbia University." Taking a walk near his house, Ellison sees "a tall young brown-skinned man" coming toward him

[1] THE COLLECTED ESSAYS OF RALPH ELLISON, col. and ed. by *John L. Callahan*. Preface by *Saul Bellow*. The Modern Library/Random House. $25.00; $18.00.

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> . . . carrying himself with a proud military bearing subtly combined with a subdued version of Harlem strut . . . wearing a gray cap which bore the insignia of the Confederate Army.

Although Ellison reports being "flabbergasted" at the sight, his "alter ego" allows him to make sense, ruefully, of the apparition by remembering "the Confederates were also *Americans*, and so, God help him, is he!"

Ralph Ellison's approach to American history could be dismissively categorized as a version of "American exceptionalism," though an exceptionalism tempered by an awareness of the tragic quality of all human life and the weaknesses of human beings. One who reads through *The Collected Essays* encounters many expressions of Ellison's often-criticized optimism about American possibility—but such affirmations are almost always qualified by eloquent reminders of the tragic dimension of human life in general and of African American history in particular. In "Flamenco," Ellison connects the evocation of the "tragic, metaphysical elements of human life" in the "folk music of the Andalusian gypsies" with the feeling expressed in "Negro blues, early jazz, and the slave songs." Ellison notes approvingly that both traditions challenge the sort of "Western optimism" that trusts entirely to "enlightenment, science, and progress." So much for the view of Ellison as an integrationist uncritically assuming the superiority of Western and American culture.

In *Going to the Territory*'s "Perspective of Literature," Ellison observes that "the ethical implications of democratic equality were revealed as tragic" when the founding fathers, seduced by their success in war and the "tempting and virginal nature of the land," allowed themselves to believe that they could simply overlook the divisive issues of slavery and racial inequality. In so doing they "committed the sin of American racial pride." Black people became the "sacrificial victims" whose suffering was the price of independence. From the beginning, then, there was "a flaw in their [the founders'] hopeful project of nation building" ("Commencement Address"). For some sophisticated contemporary theoreticians, the affirmations of the Declaration of Independence, like all affirmations, are mere rhetoric, and the American Revolution and the Civil War mere struggles for power, like all wars. Ellison's historical imagination, however, never descends to cynicism. If the acceptance of slavery is the tragic flaw in the national drama, it is a drama whose tragedy becomes all the more profound when measured against the still unfulfilled aspirations of the Declaration. It is an unfinished drama, and whether the sacrifices of both blacks and whites have been in vain is still in doubt. And yet, declares Ellison, the "old sacred words" have been "made luminous by human sacrifice, by the shedding of blood . . . We are not so sophisticated that we are able to throw that off."

The involuntary sacrifice imposed on black Americans confers obligations recognized obliquely as well as explicitly in our great novels, in

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which "the black American was endowed linguistically with an ambivalent power, like that vested in Elizabethan clowns, Christian martyrs, and tragic heroes." Ellison counts Melville, Mark Twain and Faulkner, and, at one remove, Henry James and Ernest Hemingway among those who have probed and thus moved closer to resolving the national drama centering on equality and race. For Ellison American history is neither a story of progress nor a narrative of power and victimization. Tragic in its structure, American history is a drama that moves slowly and crookedly toward fulfillment of the democratic faith.

The authority of Ellison's view of American history lies in his examples more than in his theses. He distinguishes between

> two basic versions of American history: one which is written and as neatly stylized as ancient myth, and the other unwritten and as chaotic and full of contradictions, changes of pace, and surprises as life itself. ("Going to the Territory")

The latter is evoked in Ellison's stories of individuals "full of contradictions, changes of pace, and surprises." One such was Inman Page, born a slave, who, after graduation from Brown University, took "the ideals of New England" to the "wild young state of Oklahoma" ("Going to the Territory"). In his seventies he became the principal of Ellison's high school, Frederick Douglass. There, as a "grand, dignified elder" ("Portrait of Inman Page"), he conveyed to the young Ellison and his classmates that "the language of Shakespeare and the King James version of the Bible" was "as natural and as normal coming from one of our own as an inspired jazz improvisation" ("Going to the Territory"). Another such is James Armistead Lafayette, born a slave of the Virginian William Armistead, who enlisted in the Revolutionary Army under the Marquis de Lafayette. Acting as a double agent, he "risked his life by pretending to supply [the British general] Cornwallis with information damaging to the Americans" ("James Armistead Lafayette"). In the last essay of *The Collected Essays*, Ellison describes his grandfather, "Big" Alfred Ellison. Emancipated in 1865, Alfred Ellison was elected town marshall of Abbeville, South Carolina in 1871 despite his illiteracy. He was re-elected several times, even in 1876, after "white Democrats regained control" ("Address at the Whiting Foundation"). Ellison himself had known his grandfather "as a mute patriarchal figure who stared from the wall in an old photograph"; it was a white South Carolinian who brought his grandfather "so vividly to life in printed words on a page."

These individual lives traced by Ellison are more than just fables of success. The careers of Inman Page and Alfred Ellison were limited by the end of Reconstruction. Alfred Ellison describes, in a document quoted by Ralph Ellison, being kept from voting in 1895. James Armistead Lafayette was awarded emancipation after the American Revolution and, eventually, received a veteran's pension. Ellison points

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out, however, that he was still not a citizen. The three lives demonstrate nevertheless what Ellison calls "the underground, unconscious logic of the democratic process" ("Going to the Territory"). Unofficial, unplanned connections are made; individuals meet, cultures overlap, and the result is something new, something American.

From the beginning Ellison insisted on the particularity and irreducibility of African American life. One of the earliest essays included in *Shadow and Act* is a review of Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma.* Written in 1944, the essay reveals an Ellison still very much indebted to Marxism objecting strongly to Myrdal's neglect of "the class struggle." Ellison's most serious criticism of the book, however, is reserved for Myrdal's explanation of the attitudes of Negroes as "secondary reactions" to "more primary pressures" from whites. Ellison, later to be ostracized and condemned for his rejection of black separatism, responds with an affirmation that sounds one of the keynotes of his writing. American Negroes, he insists, are not "simply the creation of white men," and, if there is "much of Negro culture" that "might be negative," "there is also much of great value and richness, which . . . Negroes will not willingly disregard." Years later Ellison would admonish Irving Howe in a famous exchange that there was more to Negro life than "unrelieved suffering" ("The World and the Jug"), and in "The Myth of the Flawed White Southerner" would register his irritation at intellectuals who objected to his 1965 defense of President Lyndon Johnson because they seemed to assume that "I and those of my background possess no interest that they, my friends and colleagues, had any need to understand or respect."

Although Ellison avoided theorizing, his essays connect literature and politics, high art and democracy, more persuasively than any contemporary theoreticians have yet managed to do. The first essay in *Going to the Territory,* "The Little Man at Chehaw Station," provides perhaps the fullest statement of Ellison's reflections on the cultural implications of democracy. Against both paleo-conservatives and contemporary radicals who agree in linking artistic greatness to social hierarchy, Ellison insists that a truly democratic culture spurs artists to attain the highest standards possible. The "little man at Chehaw Station" serves Ellison "as a metaphor for those individuals we sometimes meet whose refinement of sensibility is inadequately explained by family background, formal education, or social status." Even at Chehaw Station, "a lonely whistle-stop" outside Tuskegee, Alabama, there might be somebody whose taste surpasses the artist's own. The expectation that the "little man at Chehaw Station" may turn up anywhere in any disguise is an article of the democratic faith precluding condescension to any audience.

Ellison demonstrates the folly of confining the possibilities of individuals within sociological categories not with counter-systematizing but with images and stories. He dramatizes the folly of any "rigid ethnocultural perspective" with a word picture of an individual sighted on

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"New York's Riverside Drive near 151st Street" whose appearance conveyed "status, property and authority" as well as their opposites, and more than one ethnicity:

> a light-skinned, blue-eyed, Afro-American featured individual . . . in a shiny new blue Volkswagen Beetle decked out with a gleaming Rolls-Royce radiator . . . Clad in handsome black riding boots and fawn-colored riding breeches of English tailoring, he took the curb wielding, with an ultra-pukka-sahib haughtiness, a leather riding crop. A dashy dashiki . . . flowed from his broad shoulders . . . while . . . a black homburg hat tilted at a jaunty angle floated majestically on the crest of his huge Afro-coifed head.

Was he "a militant black nationalist," a member of the *haute bourgeoisie*, or both, or neither? Whatever his politics or sources of income, "culturally, he was an American joker." Refusing to be defined by race or class, he was creating his own culture through "the mixture, the improvised form, the willful juxtaposition of modes." "Jokers" like this one are ignored by sloganeers of authenticity and avoided by sociologists seeking clear definitions, but they populate Ellison's essays and fiction.

The essay closes with an even more telling image. Ellison recalls an afternoon in the late thirties when he was going through Harlem circulating a petition. The young Ellison, already an aspiring writer who attended the Metropolitan Opera whenever possible, took for granted the gap between his own culture and that of the poor on whose behalf he was petitioning. Exploring the basement of a tenement, he hears "Afro-American voices, raised in violent argument." What not merely surprises but bewilders the young Ellison is the topic of the argument: "these foul-mouthed black workingmen were locked in verbal combat over which of two celebrated Metropolitan Opera divas was the superior soprano!" It turns out, finally, that these workingmen are indeed familiar with the Metropolitan Opera; as one of them explains, "we been down there wearing leopard skins and carrying spears or waving things like palm leafs and ostrich-tail fans for *years*!" The incident confounds all the young Ellison's "assumptions regarding the correlation between educational levels, class, race and the possession of conscious culture." These men were, undoubtedly, exceptions to the rule—but the lesson Ellison absorbed and passes on is that the artist keeps the democratic faith by recognizing the potential for such exceptions in every audience, in every individual.

Ellison has been criticized both for his political views and for his alleged lack of politics. In the only book on Ellison as essayist and intellectual rather than novelist, Jerry Gafio Watts notes that "Ellison has had the rare honor of being attacked by black leftists and black

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nationalists."[2] Watts himself joins the attackers, finding that Ellison is "not fundamentally democratically minded" and in fact is a "meritocratic elitist" who uses "an intensified elitist individuality as a social marginality facilitator." Ellison would not have worried too much about the charge of elitism, one suspects; he wrote in "Going to the Territory" that the jazz musicians who exemplify the creative possibilities of the democratic vernacular are themselves "unreconstructed elitists" dedicated to "maintaining the highest standards of the music which expresses their sense of the American experience."

Whether Ellison's essays are "elitist" is, in any case, beside the point. *The Collected Essays*, like *Invisible Man*, resists political and sociological categorization but demands judgment as art. The publication of this volume should encourage recognition of Ellison as one of the great American essayists, in the company of his namesake Ralph Waldo Emerson, H. L. Mencken (defended by Ellison in a 1990 letter to the editor[3]), and a few others. In an age when English professors eagerly reduce literary works to sociological "texts," the fidelity of Ralph Ellison's *oeuvre*, not only to the actualities of African American life and the promises of political democracy but to the human possibilities evoked in art, seems remarkable indeed.

[2] Jerry Gafio Watts, *Heroism and the Black Intellectual: Ralph Ellison, Politics, and Afro-American Intellectual Life* (Chapel Hill, 1994).

[3] Louis Auchincloss, Ralph Ellison, John Kenneth Galbraith, John Hersey, Norman Mailer, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., William Styron, and Kurt Vonnegut. Letter. *The New York Review of Books*, No. 53, March 15, 1990.

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ROBERT SCHULTZ

One Retrospective, Four Sequels, and Three Debuts

THE COLLECTED POEMS OF ROBERT HAYDEN is one of twentieth-century America's essential books, and its reissue is a service to readers who know Hayden only through his familiar anthology pieces, such as "Those Winter Sundays," "Frederick Douglass," and "A Ballad of Remembrances."[1] The current edition stands as edited in 1985 by Frederick Glaysher, but adds a substantial introduction by Arnold Rampersad. This new introduction is extremely helpful; it provides biographical, editorial, and critical information for the reader coming to Hayden's whole body of work for the first time. Glaysher's editing follows the poet's expressed wishes by trimming an already slim body of work down to roughly 90 poems, omitting entirely Hayden's first three books, which the poet referred to as his "prentice pieces." What remains is a powerfully compact collection remarkable for the way it blends lyrical invention, rhetorical dignity, and historical witness.

One of these three strains in Hayden's poetry sometimes predominates in individual poems, and the three anthology pieces already mentioned can be taken as examples. "Those Winter Sundays," one of the great poems about a father and son, exhibits lyrical resources possessed by few poets in any generation. The synesthesia of the phrases "blueblack cold" and "I'd wake to hear the cold splintering, breaking"; the plosive alliteration of "cracked hands that ached" and "banked fires blaze"; and the perfect dictional resonance of the word "offices" in the poem's ending ("What did I know, what did I know / of love's austere and lonely offices?") make the recalled scene and the mature speaker's regret virtually palpable. The sonnet "Frederick Douglass," with its urgent and relentless parallel phrasings, shows Hayden's ability to achieve a rhetorical monumentality. And, finally, "A Ballad of Remembrances"—in which the poet registers his horror in New Orleans at Mardi Gras time and his relief at the arrival of his friend Mark Van Doren—can represent those many poems in which Hayden's intent is historical witness and cultural judgment.

The achievement of Hayden's poetry is to have so successfully combined the lyric and rhetorical in the task of cultural appraisal. In doing so, he often exploited the potential for lyric concision in the

[1] COLLECTED POEMS, by *Robert Hayden*. Liveright Publishing Corporation. $23.00.

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poetic sequence. Outstanding examples include "Middle Passage," "John Brown," "Words in the Mourning Time" (on Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy, and the Vietnam War), and his remarkable poem on Malcolm X entitled "El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz," the Muslim name Malcolm adopted upon his conversion to the traditional Islamic faith. In the latter poem, Hayden communicates the gists of Malcolm's successive selves in a tight, four-part poem. In the first part, Malcolm's young, pre-Nation of Islam manhood is epitomized with lyric concentration in such lines as: "He skirmished in the Upas trees / and cannibal flowers of the American Dream—." Malcolm's discipleship to Muhammad Elijah is generously understood but harshly judged, as is his role as scourge, when he attempted with scalding rhetoric to drive blacks from "the lush ice gardens of their servitude." And finally, Hayden celebrates what he calls Malcolm's "final metamorphosis":

> He fell upon his face before
> Allah the raceless in whose blazing Oneness all
> were one. He rose renewed, renamed, became
> much more than there was time for him to be.

In this poem, as in "A Ballad of Remembrances" and many more, we encounter a poet generous with understanding but fearless of judging and being judged. Rampersad provides a clear summary of how affinities for the poetry of Countee Cullen, W. H. Auden, and W. B. Yeats led Hayden to declare that he wished to be a black poet "the way Yeats is an Irish poet": independent-minded, praising and blaming as he saw fit, and dedicated to the lyric mode, with all its delicate fingerings, as opposed to thumb-blunt propaganda.

Linda Pastan and Stephen Dobyns could take a lesson from the example of Robert Hayden, who edited himself so rigorously. And maybe they will, if they have the opportunity to give instructions for their collected poems. Both Pastan's *An Early Afterlife*[2] and Dobyns' *Common Carnage*[3] could be taut, satisfying volumes at one-half to one-third their present lengths.

Pastan is a very good poet, and the present collection, her ninth, is a pleasant and mostly undemanding read. There are, to my mind, ten outstanding poems which rise above this level and which are especially fine for one of three reasons. Sometimes her emotional engagement with a particular subject will raise her language into a heightened accuracy, purged of all sense of having been self-consciously "written." This is the case, for instance, in a poem upon the death of a dear aunt, "In a Northern Country," and in a poem contemplating her own death, "Sometimes." In other poems a sheer freshness of idea is compelling, as

[2] AN EARLY AFTERLIFE, by *Linda Pastan*. W. W. Norton & Company. $10.00p.
[3] COMMON CARNAGE, by *Stephen Dobyns*. Penguin Books. $14.95p.

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in the book's title poem or in "Landscape with Statues," in which "the dead / come back to us / in all their old poses, / as if they were playing / the childhood game of statues / on lawns so green they drink / the shadows to oblivion." And, finally, a handful of poems command our special attention because of a dramatic situation which seems original or especially authentic. After several dull poems I was startled alert when, in the next, Pastan remembers riding in a car as a young girl with her father, telling him to shut up, and, for punishment, being abandoned "like a parcel in the car / on a strange street."

In the lesser poems the flywheel of composition seems to turn by the impetus of its own momentum, yielding automatic figures and sentimental personifications. Snow is noted for its "silken surface" and its "innocence." Leaves fall, each "waving good-bye to the oak / or poplar that housed it." In another poem, each leaf is "its own / small vessel, / a dozen / colored sails / becoming / an armada." Or, in another poem, the leaves again: "the small shriveled mouths / stutter in every wind. . . . " Such lapses are unfortunately numerous, especially when we know what Pastan can do. Her poem, "The Apple Shrine," one of those raised by the intensity of its dramatic situation, is the gem of the collection. It recounts her husband's sudden, inexplicable loss of sight the day after spreading borrowed blossoms to pollinate a new apple tree. Their world is shaken, their vulnerability revealed. And then these concluding lines:

> . . . Today you start to see again,
> and I wonder how long we'll remember to be grateful
> before we lose ourselves complicitously
> in the everyday, waking up surprised one morning
> next autumn when for the first time
> our tree will be strung with a rosary of apples.

In its best moments, *An Early Afterlife* is a brave book about aging which moves through its elegies into gratitude for what remains.

Stephen Dobyns' *Common Carnage* opens and closes with an effective pair of book-end poems. In between there are interesting threads: scattered poems contemplate the Homeric heroes; others imagine disembodied souls animating nature in the form of street racket (the scornful), sharp stones (those who raged), or thorns ("souls of great desire"). Dobyns is good at capturing the experience of listening to jazz in poems such as "Thelonious Monk," "The Impossible," and "Middle-Aged Black Men." And he has an interesting way with the villanelle, using its repetitions to highlight defining moments within looping narratives.

Dobyns is affable, curious, attentive, humorous, and voluble. Especially voluble. This book, his ninth since 1972 (a period during which he also published 17 novels!), is too long. Dozens of poems could be

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omitted, allowing the better ones to rise into clearer view. And, within even many of the best poems, readers may tire of the relentless explanatory voice that blunts narrative drive and figurative power. Dobyns will present a stimulating dramatic situation or metaphoric image, then, maddeningly, explicate it, often after the astonishing condescension of a phrase such as "So it is with the world," "Doesn't art have this purpose as well?" or "And isn't this the way with humankind?" This is poetry lite; the experience is like reading a glossy magazine or watching TV. I was never tempted to read a poem twice.

Where are the editors? At 70 pages, rather than its present 127, and with many of the best poems pruned back to drama and image, this book might have offered that sense of concentration, suddenness, and fine excess which excites the imagination into activity. Instead, I felt overwhelmed into passivity, the way death is overcome by Odysseus in the poem "Rattletrap" by the hero's incessant talking: "the human whine that accompanies the long decline."

Pastan and Dobyns might take a few months off from writing to contemplate her poem "Surfeit":

> There are so many poems
> in the world. There are so many
> tea-colored peaches ripening
> or rotting on the trees;
> there is so much noisy
> birdsong, so many trees.
> I long for the God of abstinence
> whose single fruit
> is the sun, whose brief hymn
> is the one poem necessary.

Phillis Levin's *The Afterimage*, her second book, suggests to me a possible definition of grace, in an almost theological sense.[4] Grace in this work is a responsiveness to the world, such that even a random street incident or coincidence can open the possibility of meanings. In the book's second poem, "Possessions," the poet, riding the subway in New York City, finds herself wedged between two women, one paging through a tiny Bible, the other spinning a small world globe. The arrangement seems so uncannily symbolic that she at first suspects the women of being performers or con artists, but rejects that notion. Finally, she feels that she's become part of an emblem, but of what? And then, in the street, she encounters a third person, a ragged, abandoned, and apparently demented man, who stumbles forward, carrying in his hands what appears to be his sole possession—a gold

[4] THE AFTERIMAGE, by *Phillis Levin*. Copper Beech Press. $9.95p.

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watch in a velvet box ("In awe he held it in front of him"). The poem concludes:

> . . . And he and those
> Two women and I, with nothing
> to say to each other, were here on the same
>
> Small globe, written in the same book,
> Together and apart at one time
> In innocence, guilt, and poverty.

The poet accepts her experience as figural. A watch, a globe, the Bible: time, space, and transcendence. But these things were held by human beings, fortunate and unfortunate, moving within a moral frame, and fixed on the possessions which defined their longings: for rectitude, for experience, for luxury. It is a complex epiphany, mapping the terrain of human desires and our isolation within separate obsessions.

This same attentiveness to events and a radical openness to the possibility of revelation are evident in "The Pocketbook" and "The Landing." The latter poem is remarkable for the poet's admission that sometimes our experience remains mute, illegible. A shoot of wind-blown compass grass tracing figures in beach-sand remains "A blade standing only for what it is." The candor of the admission authenticates what other moments have disclosed.

The temperament of Levin's poetry is both spiritual and philosophical. If the world flashes with epiphany, we must also interrogate it with reason. In the poem "After Dinner," the speaker asks Socrates: "what is finer, / truer, more terrible to behold, / more disastrous to embrace— / the desire for knowledge / or the desire for beauty?" The question is finally unanswerable, however, not only because beauty and truth are inextricably tangled, but because, stubborn for wholeness, we would not choose if we could. The poem's closing stanza is finely nuanced, combining thought with music through meaningful enjambments and subtle rhymes.

Faithful attentiveness, rational reflection, and musical language: it is a rare combination. And, in a fusion of all these qualities, the book's final poem, "Entry," presents the poet thinking entirely in images, pursuing an increasingly complicated dialectic through permutations of metaphor. At her best, Levin's passionate engagement redeems the world's apparent randomness into meaning.

The first lines of David Lehman's *Valentine Place* set the tone for the rest.[5] The villanelle "Wedding Song" begins: "Poetry is a criticism of life / As a jailbreak is a criticism of prison. / I now pronounce you man and wife." Lehman's poetics are the poetics of the jailbreak. Artful collage

[5] VALENTINE PLACE, by *David Lehman.* Scribner Paperback Poetry. $14.00p.

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and droll pastiche; direct statement and arresting image; sudden expostulations ("O America land of the same mistake twice—"); inventive, near-epic similes; and an associative exuberance—all of these elements drive a poetry which bursts through anxiety and loss into gusto.

Humor, high seriousness, and pathos are intimate in this collection which centers on love and lust, relationship and infidelity, and which was issued, wryly, on Valentine's Day. Wryly, because this book is anything but a collection of sentimental valentines. In poems such as "Who She Was" and "Stages on Life's Way," Lehman explores with nerve and intelligence the way two lives entangle, each dragging along its poignant and raucous baggage. And whatever the word "love" names is further entangled in this poetry with the forces of culture and history which help to shape it. The narrator of "Eighth Wonder" says of his "first wife":

> . . . She shared
> His love of noble gestures and hopeless causes
> Such as the idea of romantic love in a pragmatic era
> When the macrostructure no longer values that unit
> Of individual gratification.

Lehman's ear for the jargons which exhibit contemporary truth and folly (and their frequent coincidence) provides one of the book's complex pleasures. This poet's exquisite self-consciousness in matters of diction allows him to be deadly serious and winkingly detached in the same passage.

The history that shapes even our intimacies can be read in something as large as the industrial revolution: "The barroom boast, 'I never had to pay for it,' / Is bogus if marriage is a religious institution / On the operating model of a nineteenth-century factory." Or it can be as common as pulp fiction: "The pattern repeats itself, the same events / In a different order obeying the conventions of / A popular genre" ("Twelfth Night"). Indeed, detective novels and movies take their place beside literary and philosophical movements in Lehman's rich field of association. The poem "The Role Model" conflates the plots of four films—*The Good Mother*, *Sea of Love*, *Kramer vs. Kramer*, and *Rear Window*—in a succinct summary of what women might conclude from Hollywood's depictions of them. But if, even in love, we obey the conventions of a popular genre, at least we can throw our hearts into "roles to be played with panache" ("Toward a Definition of Love").

"Panache," "exuberance," "*élan*"—these words come to mind in the attempt to summarize Lehman's poetry, even though he treats grief as much as pleasure. But, for all their high spirits and self-consciousness, many poems end with the vulnerability of beauty and heartfelt statement. "The Public Sector" concludes by turning to "the stars that surround us, the stars beyond number / We praise in poems because of

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the distance they travel / And their light, however faint, which makes them / Beloved of us who love the darkness as we do." And the masterly "On the Nature of Desire" ends: "love is the speechless joy / That lasts until it dies, and the couple close their eyes, / Tired, unashamed, nude and asleep for their hour together."

Readers may find Lehman's poetry difficult. All century—from modernism through post-modernism—the *difficulty* of poetry has been an issue. But during this period of rapid and continuous change, true poetry—the real thing—has been difficult in order to be accurate, while much second-rate poetry has cultivated difficulty as a derivative style. David Lehman's work is the real thing, difficult only to the extent that it must be to achieve its complex intellectual and emotional accuracy.

Much of the poetry of Vijay Seshadri's first book, *Wild Kingdom*, is, like Lehman's, a poetry of exuberance.[6] Its subjects range from sea to shining sea—from a Jamaican Independence Day celebration in the Bronx to salmon fishing off the Oregon coast. And its characters range from a 1950s blues guitarist, to a restless and desperate "party girl," to a refugee "pinned like a flower on the genocidal past," to the poet's friends, and, finally, to a dramatized self—alert, generous, venturesome, and alive to the need for both elegy and celebration.

The book's opening poem, "Made in the Tropics," illustrates Seshadri's deft complexity of registration. It renders a street dance in the Bronx on Jamaican Independence Day, with music pulsing through the neighborhood. By poem's end

> the backwash of reggae spirals
> to its perch, ripples
> and flares its solar wings
> along the upended moving limbs,
> as if a chain were passed through every wrist,
> as if a chain were tied from hip to hip. . . .

The metaphor of the chain expresses the joyful synchronization of the dancers moved by the irresistible music, even as it acknowledges, almost subliminally, the Caribbean's history of colonization and slavery.

Part of Seshadri's exuberance, aside from his wide-ranging empathy and his gusto for experience, is his sheer enthusiasm for language. Words are savored in the play of dictions. Consecutive lines in "My Esmerelda" contain the word "asymptotic" and the exclamation "Big Mama!" And Seshadri's sentences frequently build, clause upon clause, trellising through their enjambed lines like sinuous, gymnastic vines. It may seem paradoxical, then, that most of the poems in the book are composed in rhymed stanzas. But the effect is not the traditional one of

[6] WILD KINGDOM, by *Vijay Seshadri*. Graywolf Press. $12.95p.

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thematically significant words linked by sound in a "logic of rhyme." Instead, following these headlong sentences through their rhyme patterns is like watching a man walk on water: he strides out in a leap of faith to find a rock rising under his foot, time after time, at just the last moment. And what determines the path which the poem follows, the striding author or the providential rhymes which arise as he goes? One can hardly tell. The pleasure of these poems often resides in the sense of interplay between improvisation and deliberation—between the rhyme-suggested turns and an insistently pattern-making imagination. At the end of "A Werewolf in Brooklyn," for instance, the rhyme scheme of the sonnet seems to have helped the author discover his way from an earlier word "stalk" to the chillingly effective last word "electroshock."

It's a surprise, then, that the book settles down in its third section to present two long poems in which style is subordinated to narrative. "The Lump" and "Lifeline" present good, compelling stories, vividly told. The first involves a mystery at sea, when a pilotless fishing boat churns out of a storm with only a dog left on board. And in "Lifeline," a man is lost in the Oregon woods long enough to perceive how the world looks when viewed from the perspective of his impending death. As a whole, *Wild Kingdom* is a first book admirable in its range of subject, sensibility, and style.

The lyric sequences in Forrest Hamer's first book, *Call & Response*, may remind us of Robert Hayden's.[7] They are concise, complex, musical, and sometimes treat historical subjects. "The calling," like Hayden's "Middle Passage," grows out of the terrible slave ship experience. But Hamer moves from the historical to the personal in ways that the reticent Hayden would not. And Hayden's tendency toward rhetoric and monumentality are not found in the younger poet. More prominent stylistic influences come from Whitman and Robert Hass, though readers will not find Hamer merely derivative. His poetry moves with seeming casualness and ease, and yet it deftly opens deep and complex issues of identity—identity explored in the dimensions of race, family, generation, sex, psychology, and religion.

Closest to the heart of this poetry, perhaps, is Hamer's sense of generations. Poems of grandparents and parents in Pentecostal worship are juxtaposed with poems of conversation with friends about philosophy and metaphysics, and these latter poems sometimes feature discursive beginnings reminiscent of Hass's well-known "Meditation at Lagunitas." The tug of two ways of speaking and believing is a dilemma which intensifies as the book progresses: in later poems a dead ex-slave visits the poet, insisting her son is his grandfather. The claims of family, ancestors, and history are strong in this book, and the author struggles for a way to balance his contemporary sense of self with these forces. In

[7] CALL & RESPONSE, by *Forrest Hamer*. Alice James Books. $9.95p.

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a section of "Choir Practice"—a powerful sequence near the book's end—the speaker reports a confrontation:

> Look at me again, she asked, abrupt in the chair.
> What does your grandfather think of you,
> white people speaking through your voice,
> their history yours? . . .
>
> There is nothing I can write about, I said.
> I do not have words, no language
> for what has happened to me in this place
> I have wanted to belong to, which shames me
> and asks me over and over to prove
> I am not ashamed of myself.

The dilemma named here is the one W. E. B. Du Bois labelled "double consciousness." How can the contention between the two halves of a hyphenated self produce a coherent, authentic African-American voice? In the book's final section—beginning with a fine pantoum, "Slave Song"—Hamer meets head on and brings to moving resolution the demands of family, race, and history, as they press upon the contemporary self.

I have only been able to hint at the dimensions in this impressive first book. There are expansive Whitmanic moments, complicated by subtle reflection, as in "Berkeley, late spring." There are strong poems on the body's longings for connection, transformation, and oblivion. "Resurrection," for instance, communicates the essence of undomesticated sexual encounter. This is a book of delicate rhythms, unobtrusive formal invention, and thematic clarity.

Most remarked in Erin Belieu's debut book, *Infanta*, selected by Hayden Carruth for the National Poetry Series, will be the surprisingly varied treatment of relations between men and women.[8] Who would expect to find in a single volume poems which dramatize an attempted rape, an incest victim's struggle to face her memories, sensuous love poems, erotic appreciations of men in poems at once comic and heartfelt ("Prayer for Men," "Erections"), and a poem of especially complex emotions entitled "A Sleeping Man Must Be Awakened to Be Killed"? Belieu, obviously, is no categoric thinker. She imagines and treats the individual case with a sophisticated, yet impassioned intelligence. And she possesses the resources of language to make minutely discriminating observations. She can find the apt and striking metaphor, as when the incest victim of "Georgic on Memory" is tempted to remember her father revised, "unconvoluted / by desire, not grown

[8] INFANTA, by *Erin Belieu*. Copper Canyon Press. $12.00p.

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bonsai in regret." And a poem about infidelity ("The Sadness of Infidels") subtly captures the air of evasion and dishonesty:

> That which illuminates is sometimes only sad; . . .
>
> We're more comfortable with vanishing,
> the partial beliefs of a bedside lamp,
>
> and only trust in what we must
> keep hidden. We make love our euphemism.

The enjambment, "and only trust in what we must / keep hidden," admits a duplicity of meanings, and there is an expressive logic to the internal half-rhyme of "hidden" and "euphemism."

If Belieu's varied exploration of gender and sex is impressive, it does not exhaust her range of subject matter. This book also contains poems on teaching a child to swim, on a bee sting, on "How the Elderly Drive," and on "The Death of Humphrey Bogart." Formally, too, Belieu exhibits range. She writes in stanzas free and formal, in the prose poem, and in structures which allow her to interpolate outside sources—from Dickinson to DeLillo—in interesting ways. Range of sensibility is a feature of this poetry, as well; intellect and emotion are not separate in Belieu's work. In the title poem, "For Catherine: Juana, Infanta of Navarre," thoughts feel their way forward and there is emotional intelligence. All three of the first books reviewed here—by Seshadri, Hamer, and Belieu—are remarkable for the variety of their accomplishments. These are debuts which make us look forward, hopefully, toward long and venturesome careers.

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MARK JARMAN

On Either Side of the Water

THE ENGLISH POET HERBERT LOMAS' *SELECTED POEMS*[1] is the kind of book you can open anywhere and find a gem that makes you wonder how reputations are established. I do not think Lomas is a poet American readers know, perhaps because of the general slowdown of poetry imports from across the Atlantic. But checking the biographies of poets of his generation in *The Columbia History of British Poetry*, I find he is not mentioned among those born in the 1920s. Too bad, because the readers who do not know about Lomas are missing a unique voice and point of view, a method of perception and expression that I, for one, have not heard in English verse since Stevie Smith died. Lomas, who entitled his first book *Chimpanzees Are Blameless Creatures*, writes about love and sex like this, in the poem "Something, Nothing and Everything":

> There was nothing between us
> then something took off her dress
> something took off my shirt
> something took off her brassière
> and something took off my trousers
> then something took off her knickers
> something took off my pants
> there was nothing between us
> we touched each other
> everything was touching between us
> we kissed each other
> there was something between us
> then everything entered her body
> there was everything between us
> there was nothing between us

Lomas is as interested in cognition as he is in feeling. Yet he manages, through sheer oddness and originality of expression, to make feeling as important as cognition. His *Selected* begins with the poem "Notes on Wittgenstein," the last two lines of which ask, "Is it you I love or myself? / And are roses red in the dark?" His poetry is haunted by love, mainly erotic and theological. As for the latter he is down-to-earth, trying to

[1] SELECTED POEMS, by *Herbert Lomas*. Sinclair-Stevenson. £9.99p.

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come to terms with the idea of Christian charity, and here, too, he is reminiscent of Stevie Smith. But there is another important influence, rare in contemporary British poetry, and that is the great eighteenth-century realist George Crabbe, fellow citizen of Lomas' home, Aldeburgh, in Suffolk. A stranger combination of predecessors would be hard to find anywhere. "St Martin-in-the-Fields" begins, "City churches aren't always easy / to pray in" and focuses with Crabbe's cold eye on the London milieu, then makes the following turn:

> Yet here bums in a blue-chinned Greek-looking worshipper,
> pockets stuffed with evening newspapers, coat
> flapping, and grabs his God by the throat:
> he prays precipitately, wagging his head—a pew-gripper
> pointing out to an old employer—what?
> Is it horses? A tip flopped? A reproach or not?
>
> And suddenly I'm in it: his grace has snatched
> me out: over the altar the angels' faces
> break the wood: they're reaching down with fact,
> listening, embracing, swooping, and I'm hatched:
> a broad white shell of completeness
> has widened and cracked:
> I'm open to sweetness.

It is rare to find Crabbe "open to sweetness," though he fully understood its source and possibility. But it does seem like a resolution Stevie Smith might have come to. Here the remarkable combination of gritty realism and quirky grace are typical of Lomas alone.

The book includes poems from Lomas' seven previous collections. My only complaint is that we have to guess which poems are from which book, nor are they arranged chronologically. This may not be a bad thing, since, as I have said, this is a book to open anywhere. The poems do appear to be arranged thematically. There is a group of poems based on Lomas' upbringing in Todmorden, Yorkshire, stressing the warmth and humanity of the place. "This valley's beautiful not picturesque," he begins, and later fondly remembers "the happiness, the wine, the big dinners, the talk." And there is a long series, probably his masterpiece, called "Letters in the Dark," set, the subtitle tells us, at Southwark Cathedral. He echoes the vulnerability of an American poet like James Wright when, imagining his death, he admits, "I'll need some friends who've been there when I go."

One of Lomas' strengths is the elegy. He is gifted with a deadpan sympathy that makes him a curiously compelling threnodist. "Elegy for Robin Lee" begins, "People get very upset / when you take your life." This approach is especially touching when taken with his own, recently deceased spouse, Mary Lomas, to whom the book is dedicated. The last poem, "The End," addresses her:

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It was sad to see your sheets
revolving in the washing machine. . . .

It's a privilege to know you're prettier
with your clothes off than on,

which isn't true of everyone. . . .

Our eyes are in touch with

transcendence. Some day
shall we be together?

Herbert Lomas' is a fresh, original voice. I hope he will gain readers on both sides of the Atlantic with this book.

Unlike Lomas, Charles Tomlinson is very well known on both sides of the Atlantic. *The Columbia History of British Poetry* notes that he has had teaching stints in the U.S. as well as Britain. Those who know his work are aware that it reflects an interesting combination of values associated with The Movement—a classical formalism and precision—along with the influence of William Carlos Williams. In his latest book,[2] his 17th in a career that spans 40 years, he passes back and forth between the short, sinewy line of Williams and a crisp iambic pentameter, occasionally rhyming in both forms.

Landscape is his preferred subject. There are scenic poems about Gloucestershire, near the banks of the Severn, where he currently lives, and Italy, Portugal, and Japan. The following short poem, "Asolo," seems typical of his approach to the picturesque.

Fountains of limestone, limestone colonnades
    Reverberating like wells, porticoes of shade
And against the sky the dark of cypresses:
    Browning brought them back from Tuscany
To stand against the sunset. Terraces
    Could not mark the gradation of a hill
More exactly than their ranks, and when the sun
    Climbs down behind them, one
By one they offer it their stair
    To steady its descent then disappear.

History is often added like a spice, as it is with the reference to Browning. Geology is important, too, as in "Near Bickering," in which the poet notes that the "seam that runs sinewing England / Crops out" in the north so that he recognizes the "colour of home, the Cotswold colour, / Across these high wolds . . . / In the free-stone

[2] JUBILATION, by *Charles Tomlinson*. Oxford University Press. £6.99p.

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barrier that divides / Lawn from corn-field." Wherever Tomlinson's eye alights, there is a sense of Gerard Manley Hopkins' "sweet, especial rural scene."

I prefer Tomlinson's landscapes when they are peopled. The book opens with a sequence entitled "For a Granddaughter," and examines "the ties of blood / Rooting us in place," much as rhyme links the elements of a poem. Two of the best poems are addressed to other poets and situate them in particular landscapes. "To Vasko Popa in Rome" includes an elegiac portrait of the Yugoslav poet ("the least imperious of men") walking among the "imperial pretensions" of the Eternal City.

> Pacing on,
> Complaining of the melancholy great cities breed,
> As if all generosity must feed that, too,
> You drew your gloom from a reserve of riches
> That soon must fail. In Rome, today,
> I almost persuade myself you would agree
> That the bounty of the place exceeds pretension . . .

One becomes aware of a certain self-criticism in these lines. Tomlinson's weakness is not pretentiousness so much as an inclination to aestheticize. In "To a Yorkshireman in Devon," written for Donald Davie's 70th birthday, he recalls that Davie once criticized his poetry for "gild[ing] rural scenes inordinately." He also brings up the subject of the Gloucestershire poet and composer Ivor Gurney, who was wounded and gassed in the Great War and later suffered from mental illness. Having to address a poem to Davie, himself austerely intellectual and focused in his poetry, keeps Tomlinson from gilding.

> I could not live only on leaves and grass
> For all my equanimity, but let that pass.
> Gurney thanked God for Gloucestershire. You see
> At once how a mere county boundary
> Could not explain the intentions of the Lord.

Tomlinson works out a very interesting idea about Gurney's feeling for England. He believes that it was based on a feeling for "land that is worked." In a disquisition on England as Eden, Tomlinson shares his view that Gurney's Eden (and one suspects Tomlinson's, too) "means / The practicality of rural scenes / Besides the poetry of place—divine / And human . . ."

An autumnal light bathes many of the poems, including the title poem, "Jubilación." A note explains that the word is Spanish and means retirement. Like the poem for Davie it is in heroic couplets, but it's more of a ramble, talking about how the poet spends his day with his wife, now that he's "free." The poem is subtitled "a letter to Juan Malpartida"

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and it has an epistolary looseness that makes a reader wonder when the poet is going to get to the point. But there is no point, really, except a renewed awareness of "the great cycle of the ceaseless year."

There is only one poem in this collection in which Tomlinson expresses strong feeling and that is "To a Christian Concerning Ivor Gurney." A remarkable protest at the fate of a gifted artist, it begins:

> You will have much to explain to your God on the final day,
> And he, also, will have much to explain to you—
> Why (say) the mind of Gurney, whose preludes I am listening to,
> Should, through so many years, have to waste away
> Into inconsequence—composer, poet who dreamed that our land
> Would greet in him an heir of Jonson and Dowland . . .

The poem, coming towards the end of the book, is like a flash point. It shows a passion that might have given a greater intensity to this collection, if it had caught fire in the other poems.

On this side of the Atlantic, Louis Simpson's latest collection,[3] his fifteenth by my count, demonstrates once again that no one writing today has a better understanding of narrative as a figure of speech. Each of his stories is like a piece standing for life as a whole, existing in a kind of chaste simplicity and yet, to paraphrase Simpson himself, giving off vibrations. Those vibrations have much to do with Simpson's awareness that, to paraphrase Tip O'Neill on politics, all myth is local myth.

> I give you my friend Roger
> who recently left Denise
> and is living with Diane
> in a motel in Florida.
> Watching daytime television . . .
> Mosquitoes and tractor trailers
> keeping him awake, making his heart race,
> like a clashing of shields
> and swords, and flights of arrows.
>
> "The Cabin"

Those vibrations have much to do, as well, with Simpson's wry, even satirical voice. That voice, despite the elemental realism of his current poetry, is one of the richest and most complex of any we have in American writing today. It is in evidence at the end of "Al and Beth," one of the best poems in *There You Are.* After describing his Uncle Al as an impassive man who works in a drugstore near Times Square and his Aunt Beth as an entertainer on cruise ships, Simpson recounts a disagreement with Al about "something that America / was doing." Al's

[3] THERE YOU ARE, by *Louis Simpson.* Story Line Press. $10.00p.

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response is "My country / right or wrong." Another poet might have let this character twist on the corkscrew of his cant. But Simpson moves farther into character and plot:

> I suppose so, if you've come
> from a village in Russia no one
> ever heard of, with no drains,
> and on saints' days the Cossacks
> descend on you with the blessing
> of the Church, to beat out your brains. . . .
>
> Al lived on Kingston Avenue, Brooklyn,
> all of his life, with the wife
> his mother had picked out for him.
> Beth never married. She was still waiting
> for Mr. Right.
>
> Of such is the Kingdom
> of Heaven. Say that I sent you.

Simpson sends us into the lives of people and their stories. Is there another poet writing in our day who is known for his characters, as Robert Frost and Edwin Arlington Robinson were known in theirs? In this book there is Mr. Cooper, the physics teacher, "a cross-eyed little Englishman," at the school in Jamaica that Simpson attended as a boy; there are Nipkow and Cosulich, exporters of seconds in New York City; there's Max, "a genius in the family"; there's the reluctant philosopher Joe Butensky who observes, " 'Life is like a glass of tea,' " and there are the various associates of Simpson's alter ego Peter in the publishing business—J. J. and Gallagher and Mike, and the second-rate authors they publish. Like Frost and Robinson, Simpson is a poet of the American character and vernacular. Though he spares a character like Uncle Al, he can be unsparing as well, when he catches a whiff of dishonesty. The first two stanzas of "Honeymoon" are Simpson at his most unforgiving:

> Uncle Bob prayed over the groom:
> "Let him establish Kingdom principles."
> Aunt Shirley prayed for the bride:
> "Father, I pray an anointing on her."
> "Love," said Reverend Philips,
>
> "Is insensitive, love is invalueless."
> He said that we merger together
> in holy matrimony,
> and the choir burst into song:
> "He waits for us, and waits for us."

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In a poem of some thirty years ago, "In the Suburbs," Simpson complained, "There's no way out." It appears that characters like those in "Honeymoon" are trapped in middle-class lives that make a botch of ceremony and tradition. And yet, that a way out is imaginable, whether through ceremony, tradition, or something else, seems just as American as the failure to escape middle-class vulgarity. Simpson expresses this American dilemma eloquently in the book's last poem, "A Clearing," a memoir of a visit to Australia.

> I stood in the middle of the clearing
> looking at the sky. It was glittering
> with unknown constellations.
> Everything I had ever known
> seemed to have disappeared.
> And who was I, standing there
> in the middle of Australia
> at night? I had ceased to exist.
> There was only whatever it was
> that was looking at the sky
> and listening to the wind.

He retains that clearing as "a place in my mind" where "nothing . . . stands between me / and it, whatever it is." A recent news story reported that adding the word "whatever" to phrases was a favorite and worrisome habit of speech of Senator Robert Dole. Here Louis Simpson has rescued the word by investing it with an American sense of the sublime. In a world devalued by the speech of Senator Dole and Reverend Philips, we should be grateful that we have Louis Simpson to redeem our language.

British poets like Herbert Lomas and Charles Tomlinson appear to suffer no anxiety about moving between free and metrical verse. Their books include numerous poems in both modes. Louis Simpson is part of that American generation which, having begun their careers as masters of traditional English verse, turned to mastering, indeed, inventing a new kind of nonmetrical verse, presumably to capture the unique cadence of American speech. There was a typical all-or-nothing American attitude to this revolt when it took place over thirty years ago. But in the past few years this attitude has begun to soften. Simpson himself includes a version of a poem by Corbière in alternating quatrains of iambic trimeter in his new book, and he has recently published rhymed and metered versions of poems by Mallarmé. The change in attitude is largely due to a younger generation of American poets who have reapprenticed themselves to the modes of English verse that elders like Simpson rejected, and have shown through their recent mastery what should have been clear all along: a poet can sound just as American in the formal verse of Robert Frost as in the free verse of William Carlos Williams.

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This generation of American poets has come to be known as the New Formalists. Twenty-one of them are represented in a beautiful, fine press, limited edition edited by Dana Gioia,[4] who speculates in his introduction that the New Formalism "may grow into the movement which leads American poetry into the twenty-first century." Paul Lake's "Introduction to Poetry," typical among the poems included for its easy grace, wit, and formal accuracy, makes that speculation seem entirely possible.

Introduction to Poetry

She comes in late, then settles like a sigh
On the first day, returning every week
Promptly at ten, each Monday Wednesday Friday,
To study Shakespeare, Jonson, Donne, and Blake;

Enters the room to an approving murmur,
Straightens her dress, then, brushing back her hair,
Arches her body with the slightest tremor,
And sits, while the room grows breathless, in her chair;

Sits for an hour, while busy sophomores worry
Each turgid line, a Botticellian smile
On her rapt face, who's learned how little study
Love involves; who, walking down the aisle,

Knows in her bones how little poetry
Words breathe, and how—on turning to go home—
All eyes will watch her rise above her "C"
And walk off, like a goddess on the foam.

The New Formalism is a welcome phenomenon that restores pleasures which American poetry has been denying itself for too long.

[4] FORMAL INTRODUCTIONS, ed. by *Dana Gioia.* Aralia Press. $60.00.

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DAVID DOOLEY

Poetic Theory and Practice

VERY FEW POETS, AND PERHAPS EVEN FEWER MEMORABLE ONES, have written deductively from a theory of poetry. Most would share Seamus Heaney's faith "that a reliable critical course could be plotted by following a poetic sixth sense." *The Redress of Poetry*,[1] a collection of essays based on lectures Heaney gave while he was Professor of Poetry at Oxford, plots the course of Heaney's intuitions and interests from George Herbert to Oscar Wilde, from John Clare to Elizabeth Bishop, from Christopher Marlowe to Philip Larkin. In any age, poetic theory and practice may be widely separated. Heaney points out, for example, that the way John Clare wrote about nature "was not quite allowed by the critical language Clare inherited from the eighteenth century. He wrote more richly and strangely than he could have told himself." Heaney's point is well-taken, although Clare is by no means a unique case. Elizabethan neoclassicism could account for only a minute portion of the splendors of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, and nineteenth-century English novelists could turn to no coherent critical theory of the novel whatever, though they could and did learn from the example of Shakespeare.

Throughout *The Redress of Poetry* at least three different, indeed contradictory, theories of poetry surface from time to time. The least important of these to Heaney is the belief that poetry is and/or should be politically useful. In the twentieth century this theory has appeared in such forms as socialist realism and its contemporary descendant, political correctness. Although Plato's *Republic* is probably the first and best-known written expression of it, no doubt the theory of political utility has existed as long as there have been established governments and would-be replacements. Politically correct jargon occasionally surfaces in Heaney's lectures: e.g., "Naturally [*sic*], black poets from Trinidad or Lagos and working-class writers from Newcastle or Glasgow will be found arguing that their education in Shakespeare or Keats was little more than an exercise in . . . destabilizing their instinctual at-homeness in their own non-textual worlds." However, given that some of Heaney's listeners at Oxford would be predisposed to find political interpretations of art especially meaningful, Heaney's use of the lingua franca may be little more than a sop to Cerberus. On the other hand, Heaney does seem unaccountably impressed by the Greek poet George

[1] THE REDRESS OF POETRY, by *Seamus Heaney*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $22.00.

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Seferis' statement that poetry should be "strong enough to help." (He quotes this twice.) To help whom, how, for what purpose, Heaney doesn't make clear. As the critic Mary Kinzie remarked of Anne Sexton, "what people believe helps them is often inversely related to merit."

Make no mistake, Heaney believes devoutly in poetic merit. The second theory of poetry, and the one he most often advocates, is that poetry "has to be a working model of inclusive consciousness. Its projections and inventions should be a match for the complex reality which surrounds it and out of which it is generated." The "co-ordinates of the imagined thing correspond to and allow us to contemplate the complex burden of our experience." Poetry is "a true paradigm of the shape of things." This view, which Heaney expresses so eloquently, seems to have been the implicit practice of great writers of every age and society. Heaney observes that *The Divine Comedy* offers an example of this kind of "total adequacy," but so does a haiku. The phrases quoted above lead to a discussion of George Herbert; Dante, Buson, and Herbert make a fascinating triangulation for our working model of inclusive consciousness. I would note in passing that two underlying assumptions of this theory are the rejection of solipsism and the use of a convention of referential language. (When would-be intellectuals wean themselves from the laughing gas of deconstruction, they may want to investigate the circumstances under which different conventions of referentiality apply; even Derrida expected that when he ordered bread, he would not be given a stone.)

At times yet another theory of poetry raises its head, the view that poetry should be an assertion of will in the face of the world's realities. This might be described as the poetry of will rather than the poetry of attention, or the poetry of fantasy rather than the poetry of imagination, "will" and "fantasy" having obvious connections. Heaney praises Yeats for "flourish and theatrical challenge," apparently not recognizing that such poses, if indulged, can lead to the "astounding self-inflation" and "megalomaniac fantasy" he deplores in Hugh MacDiarmid's worst poems. Fortunately for Yeats, he has more enduring qualities than "flourish and theatrical challenge." Disturbingly, to my mind, Heaney praises Czeslaw Milosz for suggesting that poetry must maintain "its centuries-old hostility to reason, science, and a science-inspired philosophy." Heaney misses the point that, far from opposing "science-inspired philosophers"—logical positivists, for example, who would relegate poetry to a species of "emotive speech"—Milosz in fact endorses the kind of split between poetry and science advocated by logical positivism.[2] Milosz simply changes the plus and minus signs: for him, poetry is good, science bad; for the logical positivists logic, reason, and scientific method are valid, poetry irrelevant. The Serbs hate the Muslims, the Muslims hate the Serbs. Both overlook the possibility that

[2] A friend assures me that Milosz's views are not always as Luddite as the quote Heaney uses.

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Muslims and Serbs need not hate each other. Knowledge of science can enrich poetry immeasurably; the best work of A.R. Ammons provides an obvious example. As a regular reviewer of contemporary poetry, I pray there will be poets so unhostile to reason that their metaphors actually make sense. Years ago the philosopher Susanne Langer pointed out that grasping a logical syllogism involves the use of intuition. Intuition, honored among poets, is thus a necessary building block for a genuine "science-inspired philosophy." Poetry, if it is to be a true paradigm of the shape of things, must include and account for reason and science.

One poet who gives us a true paradigm is Elizabeth Bishop. A few issues back in *The Hudson Review*, Joseph Epstein wondered whether Bishop's reputation were too high, given the smallness of the oeuvre and the limitations of the subject matter. Such questions are understandable. However, Heaney's brilliant essay, an ideal introduction to Bishop, more than answers them. In Bishop's writing, Heaney observes, "One has a sense of justice being done to the facts of a situation even as the situation is being re-imagined into poetry. She never allows the formal delights of her art to mollify the hard realities of her subjects." In other words, she does not offer a "flourish and theatrical challenge" to those hard realities. Instead, a poem by Bishop is "engaged with its own business of observing the world and discovering meaning." Bishop—note the scientific metaphors Heaney uses in spite of himself—*observes* the world and *discovers* meaning; she does not impose meaning on the world or strike poses in front of it. Heaney notes that "Things as they are seem to be even more themselves once she has written them." Why is this accomplishment so important? As a gloss I suggest the following quotation from Iris Murdoch's *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*: "The moral life in the Platonic understanding of it is a slow shift of attachments wherein *looking* (concentrating, attending, attentive discipline) is a source of divine (purified) energy."

How does Bishop make things seem to be even more themselves? For one thing, she is a master of diction who knows the exact valence of each word she chooses. Heaney examines the balance in "The Sandpiper" between words that denote largeness ("world," "Atlantic," "vast") and words that denote smallness ("toes," "beak," "grains"). He goes on to describe how this double perspective is, in fact, what the poem is about. Furthermore, he points out that "all this is effected without any straining of linguistic muscle. The poem does not raise its voice or overstretch its vocabulary." Heaney's praise seems entirely just, and I am even more impressed because straining of linguistic muscle and overstretching vocabulary are the characteristic defects of Heaney's own verse.

Indeed, one particular strength of *The Redress of Poetry* is Heaney's sympathetic understanding of poets quite different from himself. I would expect Heaney to write well about the nature poetry of John Clare, and he does, but I wouldn't necessarily have expected him to write so engagingly about Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*. Not only does he fully appreciate Marlowe's originality and technical skill, in a brilliant

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insight he suggests that "the casual technical virtuosity of the poetry [is] the equivalent of a happy inner freedom in the poet." He also catches Marlowe's tone well: the poem issues "from a kind of seasoned knowledge that is almost unshockable, certainly undupable, but still not altogether disenchanted." Heaney understands how remarkable for its time was Marlowe's frank acceptance of the homoerotic. Marlowe's treatment of the homoerotic is remarkable, too; as Heaney says, "what gives 'Hero and Leander' its special power as a liberating document is its freedom from any intention to coerce or affront." *Hero and Leander* is one of those works that "continue to combine the sensation of liberation with that of consolidation; having once cleared a new space on the literary and psychic ground, they go on to offer, at each re-reading, the satisfaction of a foundation being touched and the excitement of an energy being released." It would be tedious to list all the poets of today who desperately try to coerce or affront. Even a work like Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* probably fails the test of consolidating as well as liberating. Marlowe writes as if society had completely accepted the erotic, with the homoerotic as a significant component of it, a vantage point few writers of 1996 have attained.

Writing about Dylan Thomas presents a different set of problems. Thomas was one of the poets who meant the most to the young Heaney. He stresses the significance that Thomas' recordings of his poetry had for "young provincials" from Belfast to Brisbane: "They opened a thrilling line between the centre and the edges of the Anglophone world." Heaney says that, in his memories, Thomas' poems stood for a poetic Eden where "the autistic and the acoustic were extensive and coterminous." Not surprisingly, the poems didn't quite live up to that expectation. Heaney is able to avoid either sentimentally indulging his youthful enthusiasm or adopting an easy ironic superiority to his younger self. He presents a witty and scrupulously fair account of Thomas' strengths and weaknesses and makes a cogent argument for Thomas' best work. Concerning the life, surely Heaney is correct that "the very conventionality of Thomas' anti-conventional behaviour contributed to his being too easily slotted and accommodated . . . as the in-house bohemian." As for the poetry, Thomas' relationship to words is quite different from that of Bishop or Marlowe. The young Thomas "had to be toiling in the element of language like a person in a mudbath." As a young man Thomas wrote to a friend that poetry should work *from* words, not *towards* words. This approach is a double-edged sword. In the best early poems, such as "Before I Knocked and Flesh Let Enter," Heaney notes that the words are not "set out for our admiration" but "sent swiftly about their business." Unfortunately, some of the subsequent poems, such as "Altarwise by Owl-Light," "pursued a rhetorical magnificence that was in excess of and posthumous to the original, vindicating impulse." However, in some of his later poems, especially in "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night," Thomas learns to move towards words, not from them: the verbal elaboration of this

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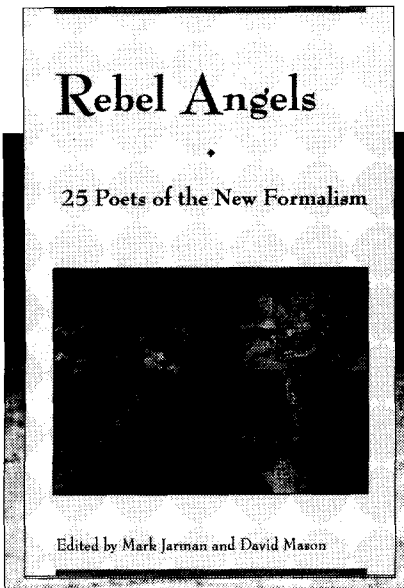

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great villanelle "is neither otiose nor merely ornamental." Thomas finally learns, too, not to "avert [his] eyes from the prospect of necessity."

The essay contrasting Philip Larkin's "Aubade" and Yeats's "The Cold Heaven" is more problematic. Heaney greatly admires "Aubade" yet wants to argue against the pessimism of lines like "Death is no different whined at than withstood." However, the poem by Yeats he chooses as a positive counter-example is not one of Yeats's best. After a gorgeous phrase in the first line, "the cold and rook-delighting heaven," the poem dips to phrases as banal as "the hot blood of youth" and "love crossed long ago." The conclusion of this brief poem is stronger but seems rhetorically forced. Ironically, Larkin's "Death is no different whined at than withstood" has more energy and vitality than anything in Yeats's poem. The paradox of Larkin's poetry is that the energies denied on the macropoetic level (statement, theme) are affirmed on the micropoetic level (diction, tone, texture). Perhaps it is not surprising that writing about Larkin proves more difficult for Heaney, since Larkin is the only poet he writes about who might be considered a contemporary rival. Heaney seems to recognize Larkin as his superior in craft, but also seems to hope that additional "life affirmation" points, like veterans' preference points on civil service exams, will alter the final sums.

The essay on Brian Merriman's *The Midnight Court* raises interesting points about Heaney's craft. *The Midnight Court* (1780) is a Gaelic poem written in rhymed couplets. Heaney gives part of the poem in a 1945 translation by Frank O'Connor and another part in his own translation. O'Connor handles rhymed couplets much more skillfully. The first seven rhymes in the section translated by Heaney are showed/abode, space/commodious, woman/freedom, honour/her, full/wall, beauty/dignity, and locks/box. Showed/abode and locks/box are true rhymes. Full/wall is the kind of slant rhyme used by Wilfred Owen and W.H. Auden. Perhaps Heaney would invoke Emily Dickinson as authority for such remote rhymes as space/commodious, but in Dickinson the remoteness of rhyme is played off against the rigidity of the hymn meters. Since Heaney never sets up a norm, his variations do not serve an expressive purpose. As noted above, "woman" rhymes with "freedom"; later in the same excerpt, "woman" rhymes with "incline" (the verb, accented on the last syllable). Perhaps in Heaney's system, or lack of one, "freedom" and "incline" also rhyme. Donald Hall has noted how up through the 1950s poets agreed about how to write iambic pentameter, but no longer do; perhaps the same is true of rhyme. Heaney might profitably learn from Auden when to use exact rhyme and when to use slant rhyme.

I would also take issue with Heaney's interpretation of Robert Frost's "Directive," which Heaney sees as a straightforward lyric about the redemptive abilities of art. He believes that the poem "provides a draught of the clear water of transformed understanding and fills the

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reader with a momentary sense of freedom and wholeness." Heaney's readings are usually on the mark, but not this one. He ignores the complex tonal shifts of the poem (consider, for instance, the astonishing move of "So can't get saved, as Saint Mark says they mustn't") and the dramatic giving/withholding of information. Not at all a straightforward lyric, "Directive" is as close to modernism as Frost gets; he has learned from Eliot's "Gerontion" and surpassed it. Far from the children's play being, as Heaney suggests, "a kind of freely invented answer to everything experienced in the 'house in earnest,' " the guilt-ridden speaker is tormented by how irrelevant the children's innocent play was to what went on between the adults. The last line, "Drink and be whole again beyond confusion," is in its primary sense ironic, even bitterly ironic; a wholeness of sorts can be and perhaps is attained, but only by acknowledging as calmly as possible as much of the devastation as possible. To miss this complexity of tone is to miss the poem.

I do not want to conclude on a negative note. Simply the essays on Bishop, Marlowe, and Dylan Thomas would make *The Redress of Poetry* required reading for those who love poetry. The quotations in this review should suggest the frequent distinction of Heaney's prose. The many perceptive observations about poems and poets arise from a lifetime's reading and working in the art. Along the way, Heaney gives a few foundations of an absolutely central theory of poetry. Readers can be grateful to Oxford for affording Heaney the opportunity to gather his thoughts about so many compelling topics.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

C.S. GISCOMBE has recently returned from a Fulbright in British Columbia. His book of poems, *Here*, to which "On Amtrak" alludes, was published by Dalkey Archive Press in 1994. . . . DENIS DONOGHUE holds the Henry James Chair of English and American Letters at New York University. His most recent book is *Walter Pater: Lover of Strange Souls* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1995). . . . WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD's *Lives of the Modern Poets* has just been reprinted by University Press of New England with a new preface by the author. . . . BRUCE BAWER's most recent books are *Beyond Queer: Challenging Gay Left Orthodoxy*, of which he is the editor, and *House and Home*, of which he is co-author with Steve Gunderson and Rob Morris. . . . STEVE YARBROUGH is the author of the story collections *Family Men* and *Mississippi History*. He is currently writing a screenplay, based on his novel *The Oxygen Man*, for Kennedy-Marshall and Disney Studios. . . . DANA GIOIA is the author of two collections of poetry. He has recently returned to northern California after twenty years in New York. . . . DANA ANDREW JENNINGS* is the author of three novels. The latest, *Lonesome Standard Time* (Harcourt Brace), was published last spring. Mr. Jennings is a sports editor at the New York *Times*, and also writes about the arts for the *Times*.

LAURENCE LIEBERMAN's next book in his Caribbean cycle, entitled *Compass of the Dying*, will be published by University of Arkansas Press. "Embracing the Sisserou Parrot" is in that book. . . . MICHAEL McFEE's fifth collection of poems, *Colander*, was recently published by Carnegie Mellon University Press. . . . RICHARD TILLINGHAST published two books last year: *The Stonecutter's Hand* (poems) and *Robert Lowell's Life and Work: Damaged Grandeur* (a critical memoir). . . . JOHN LOUGHERY's most recent book, *John Sloan: Painter and Rebel* (Henry Holt & Co.) was a 1996 finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Biography. . . . KAREN WILKIN is the author of monographs and exhibition catalogues on David Smith, Anthony Caro, Tim Scott, Isaac Witkin. . . . BERT CARDULLO is co-author of a critical study of the Belgian playwright Fernand Crommelynck, titled *The Crommelynck Mystery* and forthcoming from Susquehanna University Press. . . . ROBERT McDOWELL is the author of two books of poetry, *Quiet Money* and *The Diviners*. . . . JAMES SEATON's* most recent book is *Cultural Conservatism, Political Liberalism: From Criticism to Cultural Studies* (University of Michigan Press, 1996). He is a Professor in the Department of English at Michigan State University. . . . A novel by ROBERT SCHULTZ, *The Madhouse Nudes*, the opening section of which was published in our 45th Anniversary Issue, Volume XLVI, Number 1, is scheduled to be published in April 1997 by Simon & Schuster. . . . MARK JARMAN is co-author with Robert McDowell of *The Reaper Essays* and co-editor with David Mason of *Rebel Angels: 25 Poets of the New Formalism*. Both books are available from Story Line Press. . . . DAVID DOOLEY's most recent book of poems is *The Revenge by Love* (Story Line Press).

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IN THIS ISSUE:

For the past two thousand years, Prospero and his like have been versions of Christ, even when they resemble Christ in no other respect but their being at once human and more than human. That is one way of putting it, if we start with Prospero and Pericles as men. But it is also possible to start with them as spirits, lesser gods, and see them now as incarnate. The analogy with Christ still holds, the god become man, Word become flesh.

—Denis Donoghue, "Eliot's 'Marina' and Closure," p. 367.

When you're dirt, you:

shoot rats at the town dump for sport; have an outhouse, no central heat and cold running water that freezes in the pipes come winter; buy a gallon of milk and a loaf of bread on the cuff in the middle of the week, when the money runs out; play race car in a stove-up '63 Ford Falcon decomposing in the dooryard; eat snapping turtle, squirrel and woodchuck, and are grateful for it; wear flood pants with the knees patched and repatched and use a safety pin to keep those pants fastened; snack on sugar sandwiches and use tomato soup instead of tomato sauce on your macaroni; race a 1937 Pontiac coupe, No. 75, down to the Pines Speedway every Saturday night; don't just listen to country music, but live country music; go sledding on the black hood of a dead Ford; have uncles named Floyd and Lloyd who play guitar . . .

—Dana Andrew Jennings, "Ten Shovelfuls of Dirt," p. 428.

These are times of extraordinary social, cultural, and political changes in America and around the world. Yet serious examination and sustained analysis of these changes in the national media can be difficult to find. Instead of viewing journalism as public service or viewing the intelligent consumption of responsible journalism as a civic obligation, too many of those who call the shots in the news media have capitulated to the notion that news should be entertaining and should speak to viewers' immediate personal (and, especially, pecuniary) concerns.

—Bruce Bawer, "Politics, the Media, James Fallows, and Me," p. 400.

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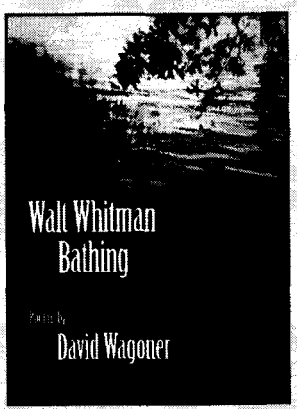

Walt Whitman Bathing

POEMS DAVID WAGONER

"When Wagoner looks at something, he brings it to vivid and immediate life through an extraordinary power with a simple name: love." — Dave Smith

When David Wagoner's last collection was published, Harold Bloom noted that Wagoner's "study of American nostalgias is as eloquent and moving as that of James Wright." The same could be said of *Walt Whitman Bathing*, in which Wagoner's poems range from the lyric to the satiric, the elegiac to the transcendental, the autobiographical to the visionary.

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